

OSTEOPOROSIS

What is Osteoporosis?

Throughout life, bone is constantly being removed from your skeleton and replaced. When rebuilding becomes less than removal, due to lowering oestrogen levels, the bones become less dense and brittle.

This will affect one in three women and one in twelve men in the UK to some degree, especially over the age of 50.

How can I tell if I have Osteoporosis?

Osteoporosis can ultimately affect the whole skeleton, but tends to be most troublesome in the spine and long bones of the thigh. In advanced cases it can be recognised in elderly people, usually women, as forward curvature of the spine.

A loss of height is often an early sign of the disease, but this can also occur in 'simple' old age, where there is no osteoporosis.

Unintentional weight loss (with no reduction in size) in middle age may be a sign that your bones are getting lighter.

The first symptoms may be of back pain, or a change in the shape of your back, or you may have recently broken a wrist or hip in what seemed a very minor accident.

If other members of your family have suffered from osteoporosis you may be more at risk and should watch more carefully for the onset of symptoms.

The effects can be seen on X-rays and bone scans, as a thinning of the cortex, or outer layer of hard bone, but this should be arranged by your GP or one of the specialist Osteoporosis Clinics.

So can Osteoporosis be cured?

This is not a condition that can be cured, but many of the effects of the disease can be lessened, slowed or even halted, so that understanding the problem and the preventative methods is absolutely crucial.

What are the causes?

The causes are varied and include prolonged inactivity, long-term high doses of corticosteroids, laxatives, antacids, or diuretics, metabolic disease, total hysterectomy (where the ovaries are removed) and changes that occur after the menopause. Women who begin menstruating late or reach the menopause early are more vulnerable due to reduced oestrogen exposure. Women are also prone to calcium deficiency after pregnancy.

However, men cannot be complacent, as there is increasing evidence of osteoporosis in men, possibly because we are all much less generally active and don't exercise enough.

Eating disorders and "yo-yo" dieting increase the risk and there may be hereditary links.

Should I see my Doctor?

If you are worried, yes, you should. If you are at risk, they may arrange for special scans and blood tests to diagnose the extent of the problem if there is one. The earlier that you are aware of the problem, the sooner you can get help and start helping yourself.

Your doctor will be able to tell you about HRT and non-hormonal treatments, and advise which is most suitable for you. (Didronel tablets combined with calcium has been shown to actually restore some of the lost bone mass). They may also have helpful advice or leaflets regarding suitable diet and exercise.

Can Osteopathic treatment help?

Your Osteopath may be able to offer some relief from your symptoms. For many patients massage and gentle movements of the affected joints will help to restore a more healthy blood supply and greater freedom of movement.

This does not in itself suggest a cure, but if you are more mobile and less uncomfortable, you will be able to do more exercise and this is a crucial part of self-help.

In addition, your Osteopath may have advice regarding diet and which exercises are safe for you to do.

How can I help to avoid it?

Try to adopt as healthy a life-style as you can. The better your level of general fitness the better your body is able to avoid, or cope with, these problems. Here are some specific things that will help to reduce the chance of developing osteoporosis;

- ✍ Stop smoking and reduce alcohol intake.
- ✍ Avoid excessive intake of tea and coffee.
- ✍ Keep your weight down (but avoid very strict diets).
- ✍ Eat a healthy diet. **low** in fats and red meats, **high** in fresh fruit and vegetables. If blood supplies of calcium drop below normal, other systems will draw calcium from the bones to serve functions such as muscle contraction and hormone production. Some dieticians recommend that you take calcium supplements of between 1,000 and 1,500mg per day but most are agreed that it is best obtained from food e.g. dairy products or even better, from dark green vegetables such as broccoli. (**Vitamin D helps you to absorb the calcium**). Vit D, as well as being found in many dairy products and in oily fish is also manufactured within the body when your skin is exposed to sunlight. Taking cod liver oil capsules each day will ensure an adequate supply.

- ✍ Take plenty of exercise, especially brisk walking or weight training, but do take into account any other health problems that you might have and always start gently.

What If I already have osteoporosis?

The advice above is still valid even if osteoporosis has been diagnosed, but your circumstances may be different. The amount of exercise that you can manage will depend on how advanced your condition is, your age, and possibly other medical conditions (ask for advice). Many of those who suffer from osteoporosis also show signs of osteo-arthritis, and this needs to be taken into account when planning treatment.

Should I take Hormone Replacement Therapy?

This is a difficult question to answer because there are many conflicting views as to effectiveness of hormone replacement therapy, or HRT.

HRT replaces the hormones that a woman loses after her menopause. Raising oestrogen levels has been shown to reduce the chance of suffering from osteoporosis by 50-75%.

For many women, HRT has been a blessing, relieving them of hot flushes, tiredness and apathy, allowing them to have normal marital relations, lifting depression and irritability. Others find that their menopausal symptoms are aggravated and they gain weight.

Some doctors will advise that a woman takes HRT for the rest of their lives, others that it is only necessary for the first five to eight years after a natural menopause. Those women who have an early total hysterectomy, and cannot produce their own hormones will need to take specific advice.

There are some "natural" remedies which are reputed to help, such as wild yam, from which the body can manufacture oestrogen and progesterone.

Sage tablets for hot flushes. Horsetail tea provides silicon which is essential for bone formation and other required minerals and vitamins can be provided by a balanced multi vitamin and mineral supplement.

We would advise that you speak to your GP or a specialist in this area of gynaecological medicine because each woman's situation is specific to her.

National Osteoporosis Society

If you would like to read more about osteoporosis, contact the National Osteoporosis Society who have some excellent leaflets. Their address is as follows; N.O.S. Camerton, Bath BA2 0PJ
Tel: 01761 471771
Their helpline is staffed by nurses from 10am - 5pm