

Overcoming Osteoporosis

May is National Osteoporosis Awareness Month—and Latinas are at similar risk for low bone density as white women.

May 1, 2012 By Cristina Gonzalez

About 44 million Americans have low bone density, or osteoporosis. By 2020, that number is expected to increase to half of all Americans older than 50. And it's not just white women (the group most often cited as at risk) who face it. According to Bone Health and Osteoporosis: A Report of the Surgeon General, the prevalence of osteoporosis in the United States among Latinas is similar to that among white women.

Why should I care about osteoporosis?

A sneeze, a sudden stop, a silly fall—when you have osteoporosis, actions so simple that they're part of your daily routine can cause a bone to break. About 10 million Americans already live with osteoporosis every day, and about 34 million more are at risk. Estimates suggest that about half of all women age 50 or older and up to one in four men will break a bone because of osteoporosis.

And though a broken bone sounds as easy to fix as setting a cast, it can severely limit your health. Fractures and breaks can lead to chronic pain, affect your posture, immobilize you, cut you off from people and pleasures, and lead to feelings of anxiety and depression. The condition can also be very expensive to treat. In 2005, caring for bone fractures caused by osteoporosis added up to \$19 billion. By 2025, experts predict, that number will reach \$25.3 billion. Finally, in more serious cases, osteoporosis can require long-term care and even lead to death.

What is osteoporosis, and what causes it?

Osteoporosis is the most common type of bone disease, affecting about one out of five women older than 50. It occurs when the body fails to form new bone, when too much old bone is reabsorbed by the body, or both. Throughout your youth, your body uses two minerals (calcium and phosphate) to continually produce new bones. As you get older, the minerals in your bones are sometimes reabsorbed into the body, making bone tissue weaker. This process produces brittle and fragile bones that are more prone to fractures and breaks.

The leading causes of osteoporosis are a drop in estrogen in women who are in menopause and a drop in testosterone in men. But other causes include chronic rheumatoid arthritis, chronic kidney disease, eating disorders, corticosteroid medications, anti-seizure drugs, hyperparathyroidism,

vitamin D deficiency and confinement to a bed.

Could I be at risk?

Though osteoporosis can affect all men and women, women older than 50 and men older than 70 are at highest risk. Other risk factors include amenorrhea (absence of menstrual periods), a family history of osteoporosis, a history of hormone treatment for prostate or breast cancer, low body weight, smoking, too little calcium and too much alcohol.

How is osteoporosis detected?

Usually, there are no symptoms in the early stages of the disease. Late-stage disease symptoms include bone pain or tenderness, fractures with little or no trauma, a loss of height (as much as 6 inches) over time, low back pain or neck pain, and a stooped posture. If your doctor thinks you may have osteoporosis, the first step is to conduct a bone mineral density test to measure how much bone you actually have; this may be followed by a special type of spine CT (computed tomography scan) and other blood or urine tests.

How is osteoporosis treated?

In general, the goals of osteoporosis treatment are to control pain, slow down or stop bone loss, prevent future bone fractures by strengthening the bone, and minimize the risk of falls that might cause fractures. To do this, your doctor may prescribe a mix of medications, diet and lifestyle changes.

Medications might include drugs called bisphosphonates or calcitonin, a hormone shot called parathyroid or a drug called raloxifene. What drug you take will be based on your age and hormone levels and the severity of your condition. Your doctor may also put you on an exercise and diet plan. Getting regular exercise can reduce the likelihood of bone fractures, and following a diet that provides the proper amount of calcium, vitamin D, and protein will help guarantee that your body has the materials it needs to form and maintain bones.

How can I lower my risk of osteoporosis?

The ways to lower your risk for osteoporosis are very similar to those that lower your risk for heart disease or diabetes. First, get regular exercise. Second, make sure you're maintaining a well-balanced diet that is rich in calcium and vitamin D. And finally, don't drink excess alcohol and don't smoke. Though osteoporosis requires lifetime treatment, it doesn't have to limit your life or lifestyle.

For more information, check out the [National Osteoporosis Foundation](#).