
Osteoporosis and Adults with Disabilities

Fact

If you have a physical disability, you are at higher risk for osteoporosis than other people.

What is osteoporosis?

Osteoporosis is a disease that causes bones to become thin and weak, often resulting in fractures (broken bones). The most common breaks are in the hip, spine, or wrist. Osteoporosis is called a "silent disease," because many people do not even know they have thin bones until one breaks.

Why is this important to me?

Due to recent advances in medicine and health care, people with disabilities often live longer. Now, people with disabilities face the same chronic conditions as the rest of the aging population, but often at an earlier age.

Who is at risk for osteoporosis?

Osteoporosis can happen to anyone, but it is much more common in older than younger people. The disease most commonly affects older women who are White or Asian and postmenopausal. This does not mean that others are not at risk for osteoporosis. Men and other ethnic populations get osteoporosis too; they are just at a slightly lower risk. Your family history can contribute to your risk for osteoporosis especially if you have relatives who have had osteoporosis (broken bones of the hip, wrist, or spine without major trauma, experience height loss of more than 1-1/2 inches, or stooped posture). Individuals with disabilities are at a higher risk for bone loss and fractures for a number of reasons.

Why are people with disabilities at higher risk for osteoporosis?

- If your physical activity is limited, you are less likely to build and maintain bone mass through muscle- strengthening and weight-bearing activities.
- Some medications that are necessary for people with disabilities may contribute to bone loss. These medications include steroid medications (such as prednisone or cortisone taken for more than 3 months) and certain medications used to treat seizure disorders or depression. Examples include: phenytoin (brand name: Dilantin), valproic acid (brand name: Depakote), and others. If you are taking a medication that may cause bone loss, discuss this with your health care provider. Do not stop or change the way you take any medication without medical advice.

How can I protect my bones?

Choosing bone-healthy habits will help you promote strong bones. Bone healthy habits include:

- Eating a varied nutrient-rich diet that includes plenty of fruits and vegetables
- Choosing foods to get the calcium you need (1000 to 1200 milligrams each day) and adding a supplement only if necessary
- Getting 600 IU to 800 IU (international units) of vitamin D each day. This often requires a supplement.
- Your health care provider may recommend more vitamin D if you are at risk for low vitamin D levels.
- Being physically active every day to include weight-bearing and muscle-strengthening activities, to the extent of your abilities
- Not smoking—and quitting if you do smoke
- Limiting the amount of alcohol you drink
- Taking safety precautions to avoid falls

How can I get more information about promoting strong bones?

At your next visit, speak to your health care provider about how to keep your bones strong for life and to find out when the right time is for you to get a bone mineral density (BMD) test.