

Your Health Reference Sheet

Topic: Osteoporosis

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Osteoporosis is a major public health issue for more than 35 million Americans, 80 percent of whom are women. However, contrary to what was once believed about osteoporosis, which is that it's an aging disease that primarily affects women over the age of 50 who are postmenopausal, the fact is that it also affects young people with hormonal difficulties and particularly women in their 20s. It also affects men, just at a later age and with less ferocity. Some of the latest research shows that osteoporosis is on the rise in the United States and not because of the aging population of the baby boomers. It's on the rise because of stress, our diets, and the lifestyles we live. As a matter of fact, the risk for women developing osteoporosis is greater than the combined risk of breast, uterine, and ovarian cancers.

Osteoporosis is not only a debilitating disease, it's also a costly disease. It's responsible for more than 1.5 million fractures annually (Riggs et al. 1995), and it accounts for an estimated \$13.8 billion a year in costs to treat it and related fractures (Iqbal 2000).

General Description:

Osteoporosis is a term that means porous bones. It's a skeletal disease that robs the bones of their density and strength, making them porous, thin, brittle, and prone to breaking. If left untreated, osteoporosis can lead to destructive bone loss that becomes so severe that the bones will not support the body. Once associated primarily with hormonal changes due to menopause, osteoporosis is far more complex than what was thought just five years ago. To begin, the understanding of the skeletal structure and its components has evolved. For example, bone is now seen as living tissue, and like any other tissue in the body, it requires a variety of nutrients to remain healthy. When those nutrients are reduced, the bones weaken. Bones are a dynamic, ever-changing infrastructure requiring movement in order to stay healthy. Most important, there is a natural process that bones go through. They're constantly wearing out and rebuilding themselves. Let me explain. Cells called osteoclasts dissolve old bone, leaving tiny spaces. As this occurs, cells called osteoblasts move into those empty spaces and build new bone. When this delicate balance functions as designed, the skeletal structure remains healthy and able to support the body. On the other hand, when this delicate balance is disrupted, the osteoblasts decrease and the osteoclasts increase, and the bones are robbed of their nutrients and calcium causing the bones to become weak and thin.

The peak bone mass for both men and women occurs in their 20s and 30s. After that, the process of bone loss begins with a rate of 3-6 percent per year. Some of the known factors that increase the risk of osteoporosis are:

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