Keep Your Bones Strong&Healthy

Our bones are alive. We might not think of them that way—but to keep themselves strong and usable, our bones are always changing.

As you get older, your bones may be at increased risk for osteoporosis (oss-tee-oh-pore-OH-sis), when the bones become weak, fragile and more likely to break. And once they break, they take longer to heal. This can be both painful and expensive.

Current estimates suggest that around 10 million people in the U.S. have osteoporosis, and 34 million more have low bone mass, which places them at increased risk.

The Silent Disease

Osteoporosis is a "silent" disease. You may not realize you have it until a sudden strain, twist or fall causes a broken bone (also called a "fracture"). With osteoporosis, even a minor tumble can be serious, requiring surgery and hospitalization.

If you have osteoporosis, you can get a broken bone even though you haven't fallen—by shoveling snow, for example. A spinal fracture, a break in one of the small bones in your back, may be subtle and go unnoticed. Or it may cause back pain, which you shouldn't ignore.

Research shows that childhood is the best time to build up bone tissue. Most bone is built by age 18 in girls and 20 in boys.
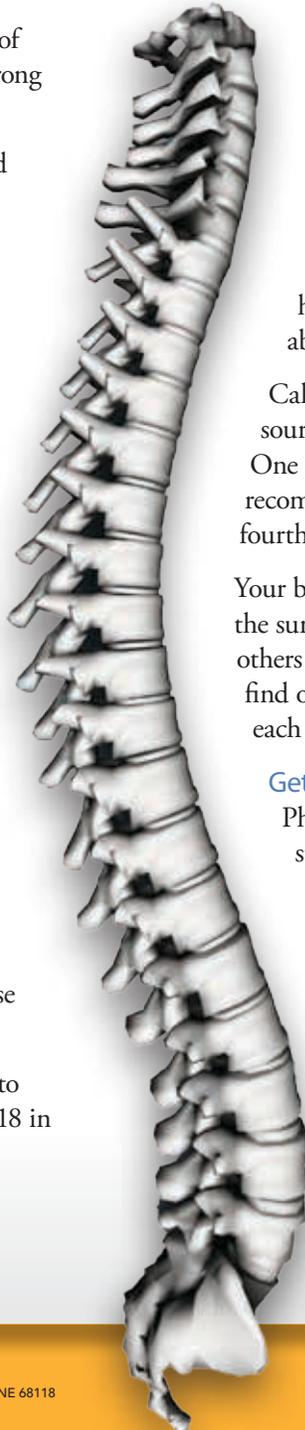
Healthy Lifestyle Habits = Healthy Bones

You can build and protect your bones with healthy lifestyle habits:

Start With A Well-Balanced Diet Rich In Calcium And Vitamin D

Most of our bone is made of a rigid protein framework. Calcium (a mineral) adds strength and hardens that framework. Vitamin D helps the intestine absorb calcium.

Calcium is found in many foods, but the most common source for Americans is milk and other dairy products. One 8-ounce glass of milk provides about one-third of the recommended intake for younger children and about one-fourth of the recommended intake for teens.

Your body makes vitamin D in the skin when you're out in the sun. Some people get all they need from sunlight, but others need to take vitamin D pills. Talk to your doctor to find out how much calcium and vitamin D you should get each day.

Get Regular Physical Activity

Physical activity is also important for building bone strength. The more work bones do, the stronger they get. That's why it's so important for kids to run and play.

There is good evidence that you can build the best skeleton by doing physical activity in childhood: jumping rope, playing basketball and running around. But no matter what your age, it's never too late to promote bone health. Increase your load-bearing exercise, like walking, and make good food choices, rich in calcium and vitamin D.

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(Continued from previous page)

Bone Health: Women Take Special Note

Women are more likely to have osteoporosis and related fractures, particularly Caucasian and Asian women. Osteoporosis becomes more common as you get older. Low body weight can also increase your risk. And so can certain medications (such as steroids) and certain diseases and conditions (such as anorexia nervosa, rheumatoid arthritis, gastrointestinal diseases, thyroid disease and depression).

It's recommended that all women over the age of 65 should have a bone mineral density test. The test uses a tiny amount of radiation to look at how dense your bones are. It isn't painful, and there's usually no need to undress.

So ask your doctor about osteoporosis. Remember that osteoporosis remains silent—until there's a fracture. A big red flag is when a person over age 50 has a fracture of any kind. If you do have osteoporosis, medications can help.

Your bones are so important. They support you and allow you to move. They protect your heart, lungs and brain from injury. They're a storehouse for vital minerals you need to live. Your bones take care of you in so many ways. Learn to take care of them.

Bone Health Tips

Research shows that there are several ways to take care of your bones:

- Get enough calcium and vitamin D in your diet at every age.
- Be physically active.
- Reduce hazards in your home that could increase your risk of falling.
- Talk with your doctor about medicines you are taking that could increase your risk for osteoporosis.
- If you are over 50 and break a bone, ask your doctor to screen you for osteoporosis.