National Osteoporosis Foundation

How Can I Tell the Health of My Bones?

Understanding bone and bone health

Normal bone.

Osteoporotic bone.

It is important to understand that bone is not a hard and lifeless structure; it is, in fact, complex, living tissue. Our bones provide structural support for muscles, protect vital organs, and store the calcium essential for bone density and strength.

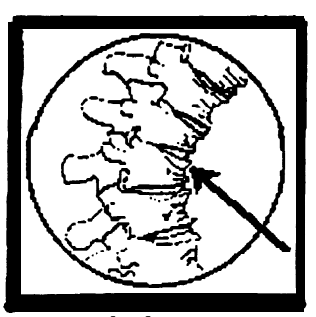
Because bones are constantly changing, they can heal and may be affected by diet and exercise. Until the age of about 35, you build and store bone efficiently. Then, as part of the natural aging process, your bones begin to break down faster than new bone can be formed. In women, bone loss accelerates after menopause, when your ovaries stop producing estrogen -- the hormone that protects against bone loss.

Think of your bones as a savings account. There is only as much bone mass in your account as you deposit. The critical years for building bone mass are from prior to adolescence to about age 30. Some experts believe that young women can increase their bone mass by as much as 20 percent -- a critical factor in protecting against osteoporosis.

Assessing your bone health

To determine if you have osteoporosis or may be at risk for the disease, your **doctor** will ask you a variety of questions about your lifestyle and medical history. Your doctor will want to know if anyone in your family has suffered from osteoporosis or if they have fractured bones. Based on a comprehensive medical assessment, your doctor may recommend that you have your bone mass measured.

A **bone mass measurement** is the only way to tell if you have osteoporosis. Specialized tests called bone density tests can measure bone density in various sites of the body. **A** bone density test can:

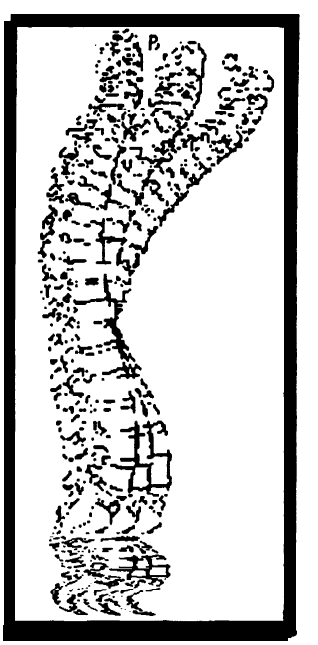


Vertebral Fractures

* Detect osteoporosis before a fracture occurs

* Predict your chances of fracturing in the future

* Determine your rate of bone loss and/or monitor the effects of treatment if the test is conducted at intervals of a year or more.



A. Normal Spine
B. Moderately Osteoporotic Spine
C. Severely Osteoporotic Spine