What is osteoporosis?

Bones grow and continue getting stronger and denser from birth through our late 20s. Gradual bone loss begins at mid-life and is a natural part of aging. When bone loss is severe, this is called osteoporosis, also known as ‘brittle bones’.

Both men and women can have osteoporosis, but women are at greater risk because generally their bones are lighter to begin with. People with osteoporosis have bones that are brittle and break (fracture) more easily.

How do I know if I have osteoporosis?

There are tests to find out how dense your bones are. The best test is a special X-ray that measures your bone density at the hip and spine. This test is called a bone density test (DEXA). The results of this test are reported as a T score, which compares your bone density to the bone density of a 30-year-old woman.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>T score</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0 to –1</td>
<td>Average bone density for a 30-year-old woman.</td>
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<tr>
<td>-1 to –2.5</td>
<td>Osteopenia (Some bone loss compared to a 30-year-old woman, but not enough to be osteoporosis.)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Below –2.5</td>
<td>Osteoporosis</td>
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Should I get a bone density test (DEXA)?

The risk of osteoporotic fractures is low in women under the age of 65. Kaiser Permanente does not generally recommend a bone density test for these women unless they are at an increased risk for osteoporosis because of a chronic illness or long-term use of certain medicines.

If you are a woman 65 or older, or a woman between 60 and 65 with increased risk factors, you should talk to your doctor about having a bone density test.

Here are some things to keep in mind if you are under 65 and considering having a bone density test: If a bone density test shows you might be at an increased risk for bone fractures, there are medicines that can help strengthen your bones and prevent fractures. However, it is unknown how safe it is to take these medicines continuously. For this reason, Kaiser Permanente does not recommend taking these medicines for longer than ten years. Women over the age of 65 who are at a more immediate risk for fractures are more likely to benefit from taking osteoporosis medicines.

What are my chances of breaking a bone if I do have osteoporosis?

Having osteoporosis does not necessarily mean that you will break a bone in the future. However, the risk of breaking a bone increases for women who have trouble walking, lifting themselves out of a chair, or have certain chronic conditions. Your risk for breaking a bone also increases as you age. Almost all hip, and most spine, fractures occur after age 70.

Can medicine help to strengthen my bones and prevent fractures?

There are several medicines for people who either have osteoporosis or are known to be at high risk of breaking bones. Talk to your doctor about whether or not medicine is appropriate for you.

Hormone replacement therapy (HRT) slows bone loss and prevents fractures. However, recent studies have shown that the most common form of hormone replacement—estrogen and progestrone pills—can increase your risk for heart attack, stroke, breast cancer, and blood clots. For many women, these risks outweigh the benefits of taking HRT. Talk to your doctor about your situation.

Bisphosphonates such as alendronate (Fosamax) build bone mass in people who have osteoporosis and lower their risk of breaking bones.

Calcitonin helps heal fractures in the spine and lessen the pain, but it has not been shown to reduce hip fractures. Calcitonin increases bone mass, but not as much as HRT or alendronate.

Raloxifene is an estrogen-like drug that helps protect against bone loss and spine fractures, but has not yet been shown to prevent hip fractures.
What can I do to prevent osteoporosis?

Even if you already have osteoporosis, the following recommendations can help slow further bone loss:

**Don’t smoke.** Smoking weakens bones. See the Resources section on the back panel for information about how to quit smoking.

**Get enough calcium and vitamin D.** Healthy older adults who get enough calcium and vitamin D have fewer broken bones. Most women do not get enough calcium or vitamin D in their diets and need supplements.

- **Calcium:** Women up to age 50 need 1000 mg daily; women over age 50 need 1200 mg daily. Men up to age 70 need 1000 mg daily; men over age 70 need 1200 mg daily. Dairy products, calcium-fortified juices, dark green vegetables, and fortified cereals contain calcium.

- **Vitamin D:** Adults up to age 70 need 600 IU (International Units) of vitamin D daily. Adults over age 70 need 800 IU daily. You can get vitamin D from fortified milk (but no other dairy products), fatty fish, and egg yolks.

**Supplements:** All Kaiser Permanente pharmacies carry calcium and vitamin D supplements you can buy without a prescription.

**Be physically active.** Weight-bearing and strength-training exercises help build and maintain healthy bones. Walk, run, hike, dance, and climb stairs, or lift weights to keep your bones strong. Activities that promote balance to help prevent falls are also important. Examples include tai chi, yoga, dance, weight lifting, and sports like bowling, golf, and tennis.

**Prevent falls.** Weak bones often break as a result of a fall.

- **Avoid:** high heeled or loose fitting shoes; loose throw rugs; slippery bathtubs; wet, mossy, or icy steps; drinking too much alcohol.

- **Do:** turn on lights when you walk in the dark; move things you could trip on; use non-slip bath mats and bathroom grab rails.

**Resources: Where can I get more information?**

The Kaiser Permanente Resource Line can provide information on many health topics, including building stronger bones, calcium and vitamin D, fall prevention, quitting tobacco, and exercise. Call 1-800-992-2279.

The Quit For Life® Program can help you quit tobacco. Programs are available to qualifying Kaiser Foundation Health Plan of Washington members as part of their coverage agreement. For more information or to register call 1-800-462-5327.

Visit the Health and Wellness Resources section on the Kaiser Permanente website at kp.org/wa for more information on various health topics.

The information presented in this pamphlet is not intended to diagnose health problems or to take the place of professional medical care.

Coverage may vary by plan. For benefits refer to your coverage agreement or contact Member Services at 1-888-901-4636.