

Osteoporosis

Osteo means bone. Porosis means thinning or becoming porous: full of holes. Osteoporosis, then, describes the disease whereby a person's bones become thin and brittle, leading to fractures that cause disability and sometimes death. It is sometimes called "the silent thief" because bone loss occurs without symptoms.

Osteoporosis is frighteningly common. According to the Osteoporosis Society of Canada, 1.4 million Canadians suffer from this disease. It strikes one in four women over age 50 and one in two over age 75. It causes many of the average 25,000 hip fractures that occur in Canada every year. Of the women over 75 who suffer a hip fracture, up to 20 percent die within a year and 75 percent of the survivors become disabled. Many residents in our nursing homes have fallen prey to the ravages of osteoporosis.

We want to raise awareness of osteoporosis so that you as family can work with staff and the doctor to make informed care decisions about your elderly relative living in a nursing home . . . not to mention your own health.

What is it

Bones constantly reinvent themselves. In a healthy person, the amount of old bone being lost and the amount of new bone being formed are equal. Gradually, as we approach age 40 or thereabouts, the amount of old bone is lost faster than the body can build new bone: we lose about 1 percent of our total bone mass each year. For some women, this imbalance can climb to as high as 3 – 5 % per year during the first five to six years after menopause. If this degree of bone loss continues unchecked, osteoporosis is the result.

Osteoporosis leads to fractures, mostly of the hip, wrist and spine, that in turn leads to chronic pain, loss of independence mobility and even death. Osteoporosis can be a direct and sudden threat to a person's quality of life.

What causes it

Scientists aren't 100 percent sure why only some people fall prey to osteoporosis. However, they have identified patterns that increase a person's risk; for example, a diet that does not contain enough calcium, or enough vitamin D which helps the body absorb calcium; lack of exercise; a post-menopausal drop in estrogen, which interferes with a body's ability to absorb calcium; heredity; a small bone structure; smoking; certain drugs, such as steroids, thyroid hormones, phenytoin and heparin; and caffeine.

While women are at greater risk, men develop osteoporosis, too; however, because their bones are often bigger and denser, it's not as noticeable. Elderly people are at even greater risk because intestines become less efficient with age, which means calcium and Vitamin D are not absorbed as easily.

Prevention and treatment

The best prevention is a lifelong habit of eating a balanced diet — rich in calcium and vitamin D — and exercise, which can dramatically increase bone density. And while nothing completely reverses bone loss, people diagnosed with osteoporosis can still, in consultation with their doctor, to slow further bone loss and replace some of the bone previously lost. No matter what your age, there's still time to:

- increase calcium and Vitamin D intake to acceptable limits
- begin a daily program of moderate exercise. Just one hour a week of exercises that involve bearing weights will help (and not necessarily dumbbells . . . *walking* is an easy weight-bearing exercise!)
- explore some of the new bone-building drugs currently available

If you have any questions about osteoporosis, please speak with your Director of Care.