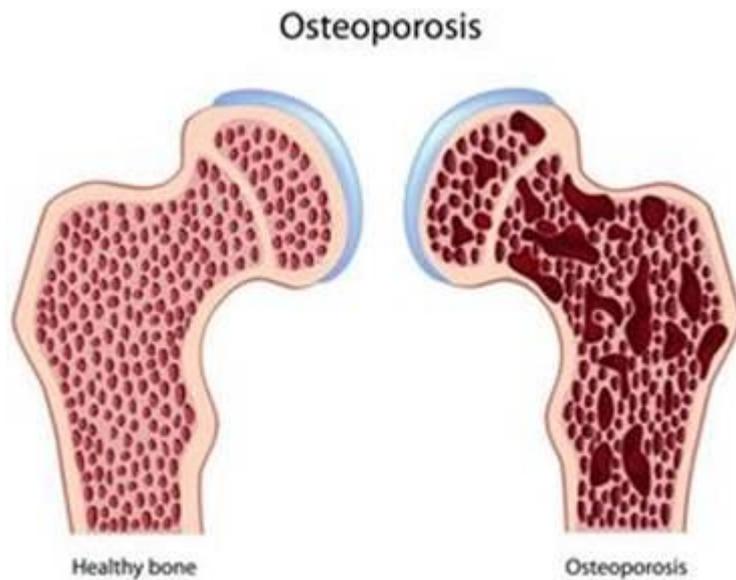


WAYS TO PREVENT OSTEOPOROSIS



Comparing bucket lists has become a favourite dinner table conversation.

There is, however, another list that is not as much fun to share. This is the list of scary things that can or may happen to us as we age; osteoporosis is certainly on this list.

Osteoporosis literally means porous bones. It is a systemic and progressive bone disease characterised by a decrease in bone mass and density that can lead to bone fractures, especially in the spine, hips or wrists.

“Osteoporosis is often referred to as the “silent epidemic” because there are usually no visible symptoms until a bone fractures,” says Peter Jordan, principal officer of Fed Health. Most people associate osteoporosis with older women, but it is not only women who are susceptible to this disease; it can also affect young people and men. “Statistics show that one in three women and one in five men in South Africa will develop this disease within their lifetime,” he says. It is not all bad news however. Osteoporosis is a preventable disease and recent advances in treatment options have also reduced the rate of osteoporotic fractures by 50 - 70%.

There are three vital elements in preventing osteoporosis.

1. Sufficient calcium intake

Men and women between the ages of 18 and 50 need 1 000 milligrams of calcium a day; this daily amount increases to 1 200 milligrams for women over 50 and men over 70. Good sources of calcium include –

* low-fat dairy products;

* dark-green leafy vegetables;

- * canned salmon or sardines with bones;
- * soy products such as tofu; and
- * calcium-fortified cereals and orange juice.

“If you find it difficult to get enough calcium from your diet, consider taking calcium supplements. Just watch out not to take too much calcium”.

Jordan warns. “Too much calcium can cause heart problems and kidney stones. The Institute of Medicine recommends that total calcium intake, from supplements and diet combined, should be no more than 2 000 milligrams a day for people older than 50,” says Jordan.

2. Sufficient vitamin D intake

Getting enough vitamin D is another important preventive measure. Vitamin D is necessary for your body to absorb calcium.

Many people get adequate amounts of vitamin D from sunlight, but you may need to look to another source for getting this important vitamin if you –

- live in high latitudes;
- are housebound;
- regularly use sunscreen; or
- avoid the sun entirely because of the risk of skin cancer.

“Scientists have not yet pin pointed the optimal daily dose of vitamin D; however, a good starting point for adults is 600 to 800 international units (IU) a day through food or supplements. If your blood levels for vitamin D are low, your doctor may suggest higher doses. Teens and adults can safely take up to 4 000 international units (IU) a day,” says Jordan.

3. Exercise

Exercise helps to build strong bones and slows bone loss.

Your bones will benefit from exercise no matter when you start; however you will gain the most benefits if you start exercising regularly when you’re young and continue to exercise throughout your life.

Combine strength-training exercises with weight-bearing exercises. Strength training helps strengthen the muscles and bones in your arms and upper spine. Weight-bearing exercises like walking, jogging, running, stair climbing, skipping and impact-producing sports affect the bones in your legs, hips and lower spine.

Swimming, cycling and exercising on machines such as elliptical trainers can provide a good cardiovascular workout. However, because these exercises are low impact, they are not as helpful as weight-bearing exercises for improving bone health.