

## **Beating Osteoporosis Naturally**

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Osteoporosis, characterized by reduced bone density and increased fracture risk, is arguably the greatest health concern of postmenopausal women. As many as 25 million Americans are thought to have osteoporosis, and 430,000 per year will fracture a bone because of it. More women die from osteoporosis than from breast cancer, uterine cancer, and ovarian cancer combined.

Hormone replacement therapy with estrogen has long been the conventional treatment, and newer drugs like Fosamax and Evista are being used more and more. The problems with these are that they have undesirable side effects and they fail to address the basic natural processes that govern bone health. Fortunately, it is easy to keep your bones healthy and strong without drugs. Simply work them and feed them!

Weight-bearing exercise is the cornerstone of good bone health. Our skeletons adapt to the demands put upon them. If we work them, they will get, and stay, strong. Consider a 1994 study in the *New England Journal of Medicine* that put a group of frail elderly women on a twice-per-week progressive strength training program for one year. Some of these people were in their nineties! Nevertheless, their bone density increased 1% on average. A control group that did not engage in strength training lost more than 2% of its bone density on average, typical for postmenopausal women. Incidentally, the group that did strength training saw improvement in balance, which reduces fracture risk, and a 27% increase in overall activity. How are those for side effects. These elders not only began to get their bones back, but their lives too! If this group could do it, so can you.

Many other studies have replicated these findings, and others have proved the converse true. Healthy volunteers assigned to twelve weeks of bed rest, for example, lost almost 4% of their bone density at the hip. Use it or lose it!

How do we feed our bones to keep them healthy? Everyone knows calcium is important. I prefer food sources because they contain a host of other nutrients in addition to calcium. Our bones are made up of much more than just calcium, and we need to get balanced nutrition to remain healthy. Cheese, yogurt and milk are high in calcium, and organic is preferable to avoid traces of artificial hormones and antibiotics. For those who don't tolerate milk well, there are vegetable sources. Spinach is a well-known source, but turnip greens, collard greens, and rhubarb are even richer. Lambs quarters, broccoli, and tofu are other good sources.

In order to absorb our calcium, we need vitamin D. Our bodies manufacture vitamin D when our skin is exposed to sunlight. We can get all we need with 30% of our skin exposed to sunlight for 30 minutes per day without sunscreen. One teaspoon of cod liver oil gives a full day's supply, as does four ounces of sardines or mackerel. Other fish and mushrooms are good sources as well.

Protein consumption is in my opinion one of the most poorly-understood variables in the osteoporosis equation. Conventional wisdom is that high protein intake from diets rich in animal products are detrimental to bone health. I don't see the research to support this, and I believe it's largely speculative. I am familiar with research that supports exactly the opposite position. Consumption of adequate, high-quality protein promotes calcium absorption and healthier bones.

In conclusion, working and feeding your bones will keep them healthy without drugs, and provide other benefits as well. If you feel you need individualized assessment and guidance in strengthening your bones, consult a qualified health care practitioner.