Have You Experienced Bone Loss After Menopause?

by AFRA WILLMORE

Menopause and Bone Density

I went to see my doctor about something completely unrelated to menopause recently, but thanks to the marvels of technology, one glance at her screen reminded her of my menopause status and prompted her to suggest a bone density scan.

Apparently, because of my age (I just turned 47) and the relatively early start of menopause, I am a prime candidate for bone density loss, which puts me at higher risk of fractures. While it is normal to mildly lose bone mass after the age of 35, this process speeds up after menopause.

Evidently, women can experience up to 20% of their bone loss after menopause. This makes post-menopausal women more at risk of osteoporosis and fractures.

I walked (carefully) out of the surgery feeling about 100 years older and a lot more fragile than when I went in.

The Bone Scan

If it has been suggested that you need a bone density scan and you are worrying about it — do not. It's a simple, painless test.

The scan uses a special type of x-ray that measures bone mineral density, called a dual energy x-ray absorptiometry. This type of scan is also often known as:

- DEXA scan.
- DXA (dual x-ray absorptiometry).
- Bone densitometry scan.

The Procedure

I was concerned that I would have to be inserted into a noisy metal tube, like you might if you were having an MRI (magnetic resonance imaging).

The reality was a nice lie down on a bed for 10 minutes or so while a camera was positioned over me in various areas — much like an x-ray. You have to keep quite still, but not for very long — no longer than when you have to pose for pictures at a wedding.

Why is Testing Bone Density Important?

Once again we can blame falling levels of estrogen for loss of bone density. Estrogen helps to protect your bones; the longer you have the hormone zipping through your system, the better it is for your bones.

For someone like me who is considered relatively young to have experienced menopause (following in the footsteps of my mom and grandma), that earlier loss of estrogen can spell trouble ahead if bone density is not monitored.

I was lucky my doctor was alert to the condition. For more unfortunate women, a fracture or a diagnosis of osteoporosis is often the first sign that bone density has diminished.

There are things you can do yourself to protect your bone strength. Even if you are confident menopause is a long way off, or a bone density test has shown no issues, it is worth taking note as these steps certainly will not do you any harm!

Stay Active

Even if you have not previously been active, it is never too late to start. Adults aged 19 to 64 should aim to do at least 150 minutes of moderate exercise (like walking briskly) each week.

Weight bearing exercises are particularly useful for protecting bone density. Any exercise using your legs and feet to support your weight is good. This can be high-impact like running, skipping or dancing, or more gentle exercise like tai chi.

If you attend a gym, ask one of the experts there to suggest a good routine to include working with weights.

Eat a Healthy, Balanced Diet

Vitamin D and calcium are vital for good bone health. For calcium, eat green leafy vegetables, nuts, seeds, dried fruit and dairy products like cheese, milk and yogurt.

Vitamin D can be found in oily fish and eggs, although mostly we get it from sunlight. A couple of 10-minute sessions outside on sunny days without sunblock should be enough, but be careful not to burn.

Quit Smoking

Smoking is linked to a higher incidence of developing osteoporosis. Your general health (and wallet) will benefit, too.

Final Thoughts

You can take vitamin supplements and doctors will recommend hormone replacement therapy (HRT) and/or other medications for some patients.

Women with a family history of early menopause or osteoporosis should definitely think about checking in with a doctor to chat about the options. Prevention is better than cure!

My test score came back that I was at a 3% risk of fracture, with the risk dropping to less than 1% risk of a hip fracture. Great news!

My doctor still advised keeping a track of what calcium-rich foods I was eating, and reminded me to keep active. She knows I like sitting and eating cake!

It’s a relief to know my risk at the moment is relatively low, and for peace of mind alone I would recommend mentioning the issue to your doctor at your next appointment, as not all of them might be as efficient and menopause-aware as mine.