Teresa Hatfield
District Extension Agent, Family and Community Wellness

Improving Bone Health as You Age

As we age, many of us will become more susceptible to bone fractures. When we fall, we don't always get up as quickly as we did when we were younger. The fear of falling is a common emotion in many older adults, and if left unchecked, it can alter our lives in negative ways. The good news is that there are steps we can take to improve the health of our bones.

Osteoporosis makes our bones weak and brittle. It occurs when your body cannot make new bone faster than it breaks down. Until our early 30's, we make bone faster than it is broken down; however, the process is reversed as we age. We break down faster than we can replace it. Common bone breaks for people with osteoporosis include our hips, wrist, and spine. Some people are more prone to develop osteoporosis than others, and there are some risk factors that you cannot control.

- Your Age: the older you get, the more likely you are to develop bone loss
- Your Sex: Women have smaller bones than men and are more likely to experience bone loss.
- Race: White and Asian women are more likely, but anyone can develop bone loss
- Family History: If you have a parent or sibling with osteoporosis, you are more likely to develop it.
- Body Frame size: People with smaller body frames are more at risk because they have less bone mass to draw from.

So, what can you do to prevent bone loss and prevent osteoporosis? Below are some strategies to protect your bones.

1. Eat a balanced diet rich in calcium. People over age 50 should get 1,200 mg of calcium daily. Low-fat dairy products such as milk, yogurt, and cottage cheese are good sources. Leafy greens and fortified milk products are also an excellent source of calcium. Consult with your healthcare provider if you believe you need to take a supplement.
2. Get moving. Regular weight-bearing exercise helps build bones. Activities such as walking, climbing stairs, dancing, and lifting weights stimulate bone production.
3. Don't smoke and avoid excessive alcohol consumption. Both of these substances can make bones weaker.
4. Maintain a healthy weight. Underweight people have a greater risk of bone fracture.
5. Prevent falls. Take a look around your living space. Look for things such as poor lighting and throw rugs that could be fall hazards. Get your eyesight checked on a regular basis. Talk to your healthcare provider about any medications you take that could cause you to become dizzy or sleepy.
6. Talk to your doctor about your fall concerns. They may have recommendations to help with your concerns.
7. Get a bone density test. Medicare will cover bone mass measurements once every 24 months and more often if you meet certain conditions. Your healthcare provider can determine if other steps or medications are needed.

Remember to ask your healthcare provider if you have any questions about bone health and fall risks. By taking some simple steps, you can reduce your risk of fracture. Healthy bones give you the freedom to enjoy life.