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Osteoporosis Prevention: What You Need to Know

Porous bones have become a major health crisis in the 21st century, due in large part to how much time we spend sitting in our cars, our office chairs, and on our couches. Over 10 million Americans currently have osteoporosis, a condition that predisposes them to an increased risk for bone fractures. Those whose lives are mostly sedentary need to know what lifestyle factors are truly preventive to help compensate for their lack of physical activity. New studies are confirming that osteoporosis prevention is easier than you may think if you're willing to make a few key changes.



It wasn't long ago that osteoporosis prevention education focused almost exclusively on exercise and calcium intake. The space program taught us, among many things, that weight-bearing movement here on Earth causes tiny stress fractures to our bones that are **essential** for healthy bones; they stimulate repair and strengthening. As osteoporosis rates have increased and physical activity levels have declined, there has been more emphasis on calcium supplementation. Recommendations have soared from 800 milligrams per day to 1500 milligrams. Unfortunately, adding more calcium into the bloodstream has not proven to be the solution.

Researchers have long known the relationship that exists between vitamin D intake (largely resulting from sun exposure) and calcium absorption. People living in northern latitudes, and in climates with less sunlight, experience higher rates of osteoporosis. Recent studies have shown that serum vitamin D levels drop 20-25% in the winter in these northern climates and may not recover in the summer where regular sunscreen usage and low dietary vitamin D intake (fortified milk, oily fish, fortified cereals and eggs) abound. Recently, the mineral magnesium was discovered as yet another piece of the puzzle; it is necessary for the **activation** of vitamin D. Many Americans are deficient in magnesium which is found most abundantly in whole grains, beans, and leafy green vegetables.

Researchers continue to uncover other nutrients that play a key role in the osteoporosis puzzle. Scientists have discovered that vitamin K plays an essential role in bone health; it is required for the synthesis of bone-building proteins. What makes this particularly interesting is that vitamin K is found almost exclusively in green leafy vegetables, the same source that provides calcium to most of the world's population (who incidentally have lower fracture rates). A study of over 72,000 women found that those consuming the least vitamin K had a 30% increased risk of hip fracture compared to those consuming at least 109 micrograms daily, or the amount found in ½ cup of cooked spinach. The study also found a 45% reduction in hip fracture rates among women eating one or more servings of lettuce per day (even iceberg!) compared to those eating less than one serving weekly.¹

Another recent discovery is that folate intake is strongly correlated to healthy bones. DEXA scans of the lumbar spine region of 161 postmenopausal women have shown that bone mineral density steadily increases as levels of folate increase.² Many Americans are deficient in folate, a nutrient found in orange juice, beans, and green leafy vegetables.

What about protein? There is some evidence that higher levels of protein – and specifically animal protein – are linked to bone loss. There is a theory, proposed by prominent researchers, to explain how protein intake may cause calcium loss. It is called the *acid-base theory* and blames unhealthy diets for our poor bone health. Protein intake produces acidity in the body, however, a healthy diet full of alkaline minerals such as magnesium, potassium, and calcium (green leafy vegetables) would help the body stay balanced. In contrast, the theory goes, protein intake in addition to excessive amounts of acid producing sugar, sodium, phosphorus, caffeine, and alcohol is a prescription for bone loss. Getting enough protein appears to be important for bone

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