

The Coeliac Society



Osteoporosis and Coeliac Disease

This may affect you!



**The Coeliac Society
of Australia Inc**

www.coeliac.org.au

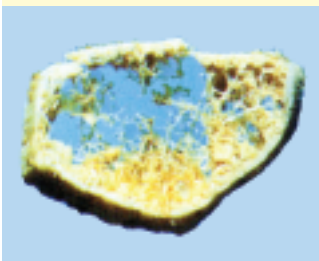
What is osteoporosis?

Osteoporosis occurs when bones, which contain a large amount of calcium, become more porous and fragile causing them to break easily. There are no signs or symptoms of osteoporosis, it only becomes apparent when a fracture occurs.

Consequently, a person will not know that he/she has osteoporosis unless it is diagnosed by clinical tests or if he/she has an osteoporotic fracture.

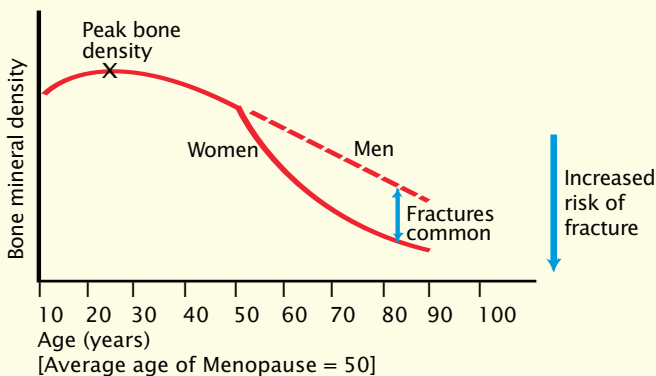


Normal Bone



*Osteoporotic bone
(Photographs courtesy of
Professor C Nordin)*

Bone strength, or density, increases through childhood, teenage and young adult years, until peak bone density is reached. From the age of about 30, bones start to deteriorate in strength as they lose calcium. When women go through menopause, bone strength decreases more rapidly due to the loss of the sex hormone, estrogen. Men also lose bone strength but at a more gradual rate and therefore are also at risk of developing osteoporosis.



Other risk factors contributing to osteoporosis are certain medications, smoking, heavy alcohol consumption, poor diet, a family history of osteoporosis, lack of exercise, small stature and certain diseases.

What is an osteoporotic fracture?

A fracture simply means a broken bone. An osteoporotic fracture is a broken bone that occurs after little force. The bone is weakened and so it breaks more easily. Common sites of osteoporotic fractures are the ribs, wrists, spine and hips. These can be caused by falling, coughing, sneezing, lifting, etc.

The classic "Dowager's Hump" caused by osteoporotic spinal fractures.

(Photograph courtesy of N A Pocock)



Once a person has a history of one osteoporotic fracture, that person is more likely to have another fracture.

How is osteoporosis related to coeliac disease?

Coeliac disease causes malabsorption of food and therefore calcium. Calcium is used by the body to maintain proper function of major organs. If insufficient calcium is absorbed through the diet, it is leached from the bones, causing them to become weaker. If a child has undiagnosed coeliac disease, they may not be absorbing sufficient calcium which may prevent the bones forming properly during the growing years. If the malabsorption starts at a later age, calcium may be taken from the mature bones to compensate.

How do I find out how strong my bones are?

A bone density test can be performed which will provide a measurement of the strength of your bones. Bone density is measured by a bone densitometer, which uses very small amounts of Xrays to determine the strength of your bones, and compares this to other people of your gender, age, weight and height. Bone density is also compared to the normal values for young people of your gender. The measurement will establish whether you have osteoporosis or not, or if you are predisposed to developing osteoporosis later in life.

How do I get a bone density test?

Your GP or specialist can give you a referral to a hospital or a clinic, which perform bone density tests.



A bone density measurement being performed.

Should I have my heel bone density tested using ultrasound?

Although this type of measurement will give an indication of fracture risk, it should not be used to guide treatment, and therefore does not replace a bone density test. At present heel ultrasound is not covered by Medicare.

My doctor says that I am too young to worry about osteoporosis.

It is recommended that all adults diagnosed with coeliac disease should have a bone density test regardless of age, gender or menopausal status. Many people with coeliac disease have a low bone density when diagnosed. Although this may improve after the commencement of a gluten free diet, the improvement may not be enough to prevent problems from occurring later in life. In some people with coeliac disease, there is no improvement at all. Therefore, it is important to establish what your bone density is at the age you are now, so that steps can be taken to either improve, or maintain your bone density.

Does a bone density measurement attract a Medicare rebate?

Yes. A person medically diagnosed with coeliac disease is entitled to a Medicare rebate for a bone density measurement under item number 12315, "a proven malabsorptive disorder". This rebate is available every two years.

How often should I have a bone density test done?

Usually no more frequently than every two years, unless recommended by your doctor. Where possible, it is important to have your bone density test repeated on the same bone densitometer at the clinic or hospital you attended for your initial visit. There can be slight differences in results obtained on different machines.

What is the treatment for osteoporosis?

An adequate calcium intake and weight bearing exercise are important. Specific medications are now available which have been shown to be very effective for the treatment of osteoporosis. Smoking and a high intake of alcohol should be avoided.

How much calcium should I have?

Different amounts of calcium are needed throughout a person's life, depending on their gender, menopausal status and age. In women, it also changes if they are pregnant or breastfeeding. Your doctor can advise you on your requirements.

I am lactose intolerant – how do I get enough calcium?

Calcium is found in a wide variety of foods in varying amounts. A diet rich in these foods will help, but supplemental calcium tablets may also be necessary.

How does exercise help?

Weight bearing exercise helps stimulate the bone cells to build bone. It also increases strength and improves coordination, which helps to prevent falls. A good form of weight bearing exercise is walking. Before you commence any exercise program, talk with your doctor.

Are there gluten free medications to treat osteoporosis?

Yes, there are several gluten free medications available that are suitable for people with coeliac disease.

How do these medications work?

Some medications prevent further bone loss, while others actually increase bone strength. This helps reduce the risk of fracturing a bone.

What should I do if I have osteoporosis?

Remaining active is very beneficial if you have osteoporosis. However, it is also important to avoid any activity that may cause you to fracture a bone, such as heavy lifting. Obtaining medical advice is important regardless of age. Treatment may be recommended that will help substantially reduce the risk of fracturing a bone. It is never too late to treat osteoporosis.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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The Coeliac Societies in Australia

Adult coeliacs, parents of coeliac children and those with dermatitis herpetiformis have formed coeliac societies in all Australian states. These societies provide support and information on the disease, the gluten free diet, ingredients, where to buy, cooking and recipes, overseas travel, educational material etc. If you would like to become a member or would like more information, please contact your state society.

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