

# Patient information from BMJ

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## Osteoporosis: what is it?

**If you have osteoporosis your bones are weaker than they should be and can break more easily than is usual. It's most common among older women. This information is mostly about osteoporosis in women.**

**If you break a bone in your spine, hip, or wrist after going through the menopause, osteoporosis is the most likely cause. There are treatments that can slow down osteoporosis and help protect your bones.**

### What is osteoporosis?

Bone is a living, growing part of your body. New bone cells are being made all the time and old bone cells broken down.

When you are young you make new bone faster than old bone breaks down. So as you grow as a child and a teenager your bones become stronger.

But as you age old bone is broken down faster than new bone is made. This starts at about the age of 35 and speeds up as you get older. But in some people it happens faster than normal. This makes their bones thinner and more likely to break. Those people have osteoporosis.

Osteoporosis happens more to women than to men. The changes in hormones at the menopause speed up the thinning process in the bones. Osteoporosis is also more common in people who have to take steroid tablets for other conditions.

Doctors use a measurement called the bone mineral density (BMD) score when talking about how severe your osteoporosis is. Doctors call this a T-score. The T-score measures how dense your bones are compared with those of young, healthy women.

- A T-score of 1 to -1 means your bones are normal.
- A T-score of -1 to -2.5 means your bones are a bit weak. This is called osteopenia.
- A T-score below -2.5 means you have osteoporosis.

The T-score comes from a type of bone scan, called a DXA scan.

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## What are the symptoms?

The main symptoms of osteoporosis are:

- Breaking bones because they have become weak. You may not know you have osteoporosis until you break a bone.
- Back pain caused by fractures in the vertebrae (the bones in the spine). You may not even know that your back pain is caused by a fracture.
- Hunching of the back (called kyphosis).

Many people break their bones without having osteoporosis. But this is usually because they have a bad accident. If you have osteoporosis your bones break more easily than that. For example, you might break your hip if you fall and land on it, whereas someone without osteoporosis wouldn't break their hip. Or you might fracture your wrist by using your hand to break a fall.

The bones most likely to break in people with osteoporosis are those in the spine, hip, and wrist.

Your doctor may be able to say that you have osteoporosis just from talking with you and examining you. But you will probably need a DXA scan to say for sure.

If you have osteoporosis or osteopenia you will probably be offered a regular DXA scan, so that doctors can check up on how strong your bones are.

## What will happen to me?

If you have osteoporosis you may worry about your future. But, while it's true that your chance of having a fracture is higher than most people's, it doesn't mean that it will definitely happen to you.

Taking measures to prevent falls, eating well, taking the right supplements, and getting the right treatments from your doctor can reduce your chance of breaking a bone.

It's important to do what you can to prevent breaks, especially as we age. Older people recover more slowly from broken bones. And some breaks, especially a broken hip, can make it hard for people to live independently afterwards.

## Where to get more help

As with many conditions, there may be charities and support groups where you live that can help with advice, information, and support.

For example, in the UK, the National Osteoporosis Society is a charity that works to improve the diagnosis, prevention, and treatment of osteoporosis and fractures caused by osteoporosis. Its details are available via the [painuk.org](http://painuk.org) website.

Your doctor may be able to tell you about organisations and support groups in your area.

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