

Ask The Experts

Can I avoid osteoporosis?

Brought to you by



Q I am a 50-year-old fairly active woman who likes to run and do yoga. I heard that after menopause, many women are at risk of getting osteoporosis (a disease that weakens bones). What are my risks? Can I just take calcium supplements to prevent it?

A Kudos to you for leading an active and healthy lifestyle! You definitely stand a much better chance of avoiding osteoporosis.

Osteoporosis risk factors

The risk factors include:

- family history;
- bone structure;
- sedentary lifestyle;
- smoking, excessive alcohol and caffeine intake;
- taking certain medications (like steroids, anti-epileptics, anti-depressants); and
- calcium and vitamin D deficiency.

Some risk factors cannot be altered by efforts, such as family history and bone structure, which relate mainly to one's genetic make-up.

For example, if your grandmother or mother had osteoporosis and osteoporotic fractures, you may also be genetically predisposed.

If you reach menopause early (average age to reach menopause is 50), the loss of estrogen, a bone-protecting hormone, can cause you to start losing bone mass early.

If you are petite and thin, your bone structure may already be small, so when you start losing bone mass after menopause, you may be affected by osteoporosis sooner.

On the other hand, some risk factors are potentially modifi-



Exercises that build core muscles and train one's sense of balance are important to prevent falls and bone fracture. PHOTO: ISTOCK

able, such as lifestyle choices and diet.

Weight-bearing exercises like running help to build bones as opposed to "weightless" exercises like swimming.

Exercises that build core muscles and train one's sense of balance — such as yoga, Pilates and taiji — are vital for preventing falls. That is important because the most worrying complication from osteoporosis is a fracture.

Get enough calcium

It is important for everyone to have enough calcium intake — lifelong, not just from midlife or after menopause.

Pregnant women need to supplement their calcium, or their developing baby will draw it from their bones.

Growing children need to drink milk or eat calcium-rich food as their bone structures develop.

By the age of about 30, one would have peaked at bone-building and achieved maximum bone mass.

Beyond this, there can only be maintenance of the bone and slowing down of inevitable bone loss.

If a young person is calcium deficient, he will not reach his genetically possible peak bone mass.

If an adult is calcium deficient, he will lose more calcium — and sooner.

Women (during pregnancy, lactation or post-menopause) need 1,000 to 1,200mg of calcium a day.

It is quite hard to acquire this amount from a typical Asian diet, hence a supplement may be a good idea, or you can ensure you get the amount purely from dietary sources.

However, if one already has bone loss or is osteoporotic, simply supplementing calcium will not remedy the matter, and other treatments will be necessary.

Osteoporosis can result in life-threatening or debilitating fractures, or immobility, despite not having any symptoms before a fracture.

It is important to discuss your specific risk factors with your physician to decide if it is necessary to undergo a bone mass densitometry for diagnosis.

As with all diseases, prevention is always better than cure.

Dr Chua Yang



Specialist obstetrician and gynaecologist, A Clinic For Women and Mount Alvernia Hospital; and former president, Asia Pacific Menopause Federation