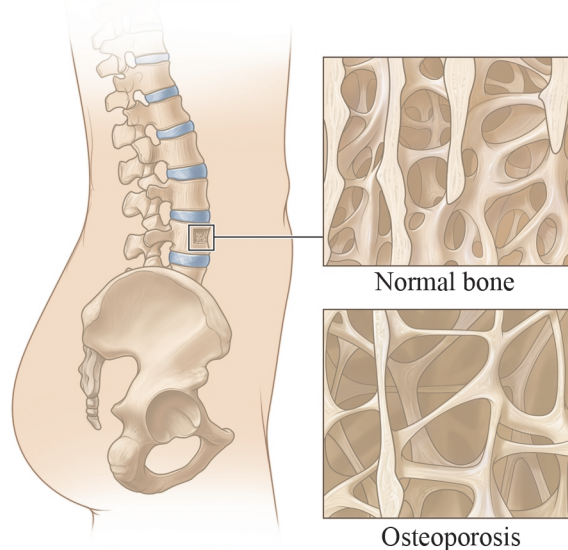




Your Test: Bone Density Tests



Osteoporosis means your bones have lost calcium and have become lighter, less dense, and more porous, or spongy.

If you are at risk for osteoporosis, your doctor may suggest that you have a bone mineral density test. This test measures the amount, or density, of minerals like calcium in your bones. This helps your doctor check how strong your bones are.

Osteoporosis is a “silent” disease: It usually does not cause symptoms early on. Bone mineral density testing can help your doctor find osteoporosis before it leads to broken bones. Then you can start treatment to stop more bone loss.

Who should be tested, and how often

Most doctors think:

- Women who are 65 and older should have routine bone mineral density testing.
- Women who have a higher risk for osteoporosis should start testing by age 60.

- People who are younger than 65 and who are at low risk may not need bone mineral density testing.
- Men, starting between ages 65 and 70, should talk to their doctors about osteoporosis and have testing if they are at risk.

Medicare and many other insurance plans will pay for testing every 2 years for:

- Women who have gone through menopause and are at high risk for a broken bone.
- People who have serious bone loss or a broken bone that may have been caused by osteoporosis.
- People who are taking long-term corticosteroids.
- People who take medicine for osteoporosis, to see if it is working.
- People who have overactive parathyroid glands (hyperparathyroidism), which can cause osteoporosis.

Types of tests

Dual-energy X-ray absorptiometry (DEXA) is the best way to measure bone mineral density. DEXA can measure a bone loss as small as 2 percent a year.

- DEXA uses X-ray beams to check bone density in your spine and hip.
- DEXA is fast and uses very low doses of radiation.

Single-energy X-ray absorptiometry (SXA) may be used to measure bone density in your heel and wrist. But it is not as commonly used as DEXA.

Peripheral DEXA (P-DEXA) measures the density of bones in your wrist, heel, or finger. It cannot measure the bones most likely to break—the hip and spine.

- P-DEXA uses very low doses of radiation.

- The results are faster than normal DEXA results.
- P-DEXA is not as good as DEXA for checking the effects of medicine to treat osteoporosis.

Dual photon absorptiometry (DPA) uses a radioactive substance to measure bone mineral density in your hip and spine.

- DPA uses very low doses of radiation, but it has a slower scan time than the other methods.

Regular X-rays are not used to diagnose osteoporosis. A bone must lose at least a quarter of its weight before a regular X-ray can detect the problem.

Ultrasound is sometimes used as a screening test for bone loss. If an ultrasound test shows that bone density is low, your doctor will suggest that you have a DEXA test to confirm the results.

- Ultrasound uses sound waves to check bone mineral density, usually in your heel. It cannot measure the density of the bones most likely to break because of osteoporosis—the hip and spine.
- Ultrasound is quick and painless, and it does not use radiation.

How to prepare

- Bone mineral density testing is simple, quick, and painless—like having an X-ray. The DEXA test takes about 20 minutes. Other types may take 30 to 45 minutes.
- You do not need to do anything special to prepare for the test.
- Do not wear clothes with metal buttons or buckles.
- You may need to remove jewelry that could interfere with the test. For example, you might take off a bracelet if you are having the test done on your wrist.

Questions to ask your doctor

Use the space below to list your questions or concerns. Take this sheet with you to your next doctor visit.

Questions about bone mineral density testing: