

Living With Osteoporosis

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Women and Weight Training for Osteoporosis

Strength training can help prevent bone loss.

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WebMD Feature

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Did you know that weight training for osteoporosis -- not just walking or doing aerobics, but lifting weights -- can help protect your bones and prevent osteoporosis-related fractures?

Studies show that strength training over a period of time can help prevent bone loss -- and may even help build new bone.

In one study, postmenopausal women who participated in a strength training program for a year saw significant increases in their bone density in the spine and hips, areas affected most by osteoporosis in older women.

Maintaining strong muscles through weight training helps to keep up your balance and coordination -- a critical element in preventing falls, which can lead to osteoporosis-related fractures.

"We lose so much muscle as we age that by the time we're 70, we only have about 50% to 55% of our muscle mass left," says Beatrice Edwards, MD, MPH, associate professor of medicine and director of the Bone Health and Osteoporosis Center at Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine. "That explains why we feel weak and tired as we age, and we can prevent some of that with weight training."

Getting Started on Weight Training for Osteoporosis

How should you start weight training for osteoporosis? Focus on the back and the hip, says Don Lein, MS, PT, a physical therapist at the University of Alabama-Birmingham's Spain Rehabilitation Center and its Osteoporosis Prevention and Treatment Clinic. Those are the areas most damaged by bone loss, and the areas most at risk from osteoporosis-related fractures.

"Good exercises include hip extension, hip abduction and adduction, and hip flexion -- anything that works around the hip," he says. "Backward bending is also good."

Here's one particularly good exercise:

Sit on a bench or chair with 5-pound weights strapped to each ankle.

Then "march" in place, lifting the knees alternately.

"You're working the hip flexor muscles, which are attached to both the back and hip, which leads to improved bone and muscle mass in both areas," explains Lein.

Here are seven other important weight training tips:

1. Work under the supervision of a qualified, certified personal trainer, especially at first and particularly if you have any medical issues.
2. Do strength training two to three times a week, with at least one day of rest between each session (especially if you're working the same muscles at each session).
3. Do one exercise for each major muscle group, for a total of eight to 12 different exercises. Do one or two sets of eight to 10 repetitions for each exercise.
4. Lift the weight slowly; lift to a count of four and lower to a count of four, says Lein. "This decreases the likelihood of injury while helping to recruit the muscle better."
5. Don't use other muscles to compensate. You should only be moving the muscle you're supposed to be moving!

6. Tighten abdominal muscles to help protect your spine.
7. Periodically consult with a trainer about increasing the amount of weight you lift as you become stronger.