

Achey breaky bones

Self Care health facts column

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A “broken heart” can make us feel pretty miserable; but the condition is rarely fatal. On the other hand, broken bones can sometimes be a death sentence

According to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, every day, more than 40 Australians break their hip. Most are aged 65 years or over, and more than half are aged 85 or over. Almost all of these people will be admitted to hospital, and most will have some kind of surgery. Two people will die in the hospital, and at least four will need to go into a residential aged care facility. A

year later, less than half of those original 40 people will be able to walk as easily as they did before the fracture, and another six or seven will have died.

Hip fractures are usually a result of osteoporosis. Osteoporosis literally means porous bones. It's a disease that occurs when our bones lose minerals – principally calcium; and the body can't replace these minerals fast enough to keep the bones healthy. The bones become fragile and brittle. They break and crack more easily. All bones are at risk, but the most common fractures occur in the wrist, the spine and, very seriously, the hip.

World Osteoporosis Day (20 October) once again highlights the need for us all to be building healthy bones and to help ensure we don't become part of these worrying statistics; because osteoporosis is largely a preventable disease.

Both lifestyle and genetic factors have a role in determining bone density and strength. We can't do much about choosing our parents, but there are other simple self care strategies we can undertake. Chiefly these strategies involve calcium, vitamin D and exercise.

Also, there are a number of risk factors for osteoporosis. Many can be minimised or managed. These are listed on the new fact card, *Osteoporosis*, which is available from all pharmacies providing the Pharmaceutical Society's Self Care health information (you can log onto the website www.psa.org.au or phone 1300 369 772 to find the nearest location). Note that certain medical conditions and certain medicines are associated with bone loss and an increased risk of fracture. Long term use of what is known as corticosteroid treatment (that is cortisone-like medicines) can be a particular problem. Extra calcium and vitamin D may be necessary in this case.

The best way to get the recommended calcium intake is to eat a diet rich in calcium. Three or four serves of dairy foods each day will generally achieve the desired levels. There are a few other high calcium-content foods, too – for instance almonds, salmon, sardines and tofu. If the dietary intake of calcium is not sufficient, a supplement will be necessary.



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The need for vitamin D to ensure adequate calcium absorption is now well recognised; and our best source of vitamin D is sunlight. Most Australians achieve adequate vitamin D levels through the sun exposure they receive during typical day-to-day outdoor activities (so the need for vitamin D is no excuse for sunbaking).

If you never or rarely get out into the sun, your 'Self Care' pharmacist can advise you about the need for a vitamin D supplement.

Being active is important. Regular weight bearing exercise helps reduce bone loss associated with ageing or menopause (this year's theme for World Osteoporosis Day is postmenopausal women and their bone health).

Not surprisingly, falling is a high risk factor for an osteoporotic fracture; so preventing falls is an important fracture prevention strategy. As we get older, poor balance and poor vision become more problematic but there are also other potential problems to consider and address; issues such as tripping hazards – uneven ground, loose rugs, clutter, wet or slippery surfaces, inadequate lighting and inappropriate footwear. You can also ask at your Self Care pharmacy for the fact cards on *Preventing Falls*, *Menopause* and *Exercise for Flexibility*.