

StarSpecial

WORLD OSTEOPOROSIS DAY

Be informed, stay healthy

AS Malaysia has a growing ageing population, osteoporosis is recognised as a major health issue. If you think you're in the clear, you may want to think again.

"Malaysians are at a higher risk of developing osteoporosis because of our median weight," shares Dr Aion Mohd Mokhtar, consultant physician and rheumatologist at Ara Damansara Medical Centre.

Osteoporosis, known as a silent disease, is a condition where bones become weak because of a decrease in bone density. They may fracture or break easily from a fall or low-impact injury.

What are the risk factors?

Dr Aion shares some of the factors that generally increase the risk of developing osteoporosis are:

- If you are a woman who has experienced menopause, you are at a greater risk of developing osteoporosis compared with men
- Low body weight
- Family history of osteoporosis
- Smoking
- Steroid usage (especially in high doses over a prolonged period), including prescription steroids and traditional medicines containing steroids

However, these are not the only factors. "Osteoporosis can also occur in premenopausal women because of certain endocrine, neurological, haematological and rheumatological diseases, as well as cancer," says Dr Aion.

What are the signs?

Osteoporosis generally tends to be asymptomatic. However, here are some clues you can look out for:



Dr Aion Mohd Mokhtar.

● **Fractures** – Even though fractures can happen at any time, pay close attention to those that occur in the spine, wrist and hip without much impact

● **Dowager's hump** – Usually occurs because of a microfracture of the spine, which causes a reduction in height

● **Back pains** – Can occur when osteoporosis has begun to affect the spine

How is it diagnosed and treated?

Dr Aion says, "The gold standard of diagnosis is by using the DEXA scan, which measures the bones' mineral density. And osteoporosis diagnosis is only formed when the bone density is below -2.5. An X-ray can also be done to look for complication of osteoporosis, such as fracture."



Osteoporosis can gradually interfere with your daily activities without you even realising it, till one day you find you cannot climb stairs without experiencing pain.

Upon diagnosis, medication can be taken either orally or through injection to improve bone density, with the aim of preventing fractures. Medicine such as bisphosphonates or hormone therapy are available for women who experienced early menopause or other types of treatment for osteoporosis.

How can it be prevented?

With age, you will naturally experience bone loss. "Take care of your bone health

during your teenage years. To maintain peak bone mass, you should take enough dietary calcium and vitamin D, and exercise to strengthen your bones and muscles," says Dr Aion.

Doctors should be aware of the potential risk of osteoporosis if they prescribe steroids for more than six months. If steroid usage is required for a longer period, your doctor should advise you to take vitamin D and calcium supplements to help prevent bone loss.

Osteopenia is a condition where

bone loss occurs, but not at levels as severe as with osteoporosis. Precaution and treatment with medication is sometimes necessary to prevent further bone loss.

Osteoporosis is a disease that, if not treated, can lead to immobility. It is estimated that one in every three women and one in every five men will have an osteoporosis-related fracture. Don't let osteoporosis creep up on you.

■ For more information, call 03-5639 1212.

No one is safe from bone loss

ACCORDING to the International Osteoporosis Foundation, one in three women and one in five men get osteoporosis in their lifetimes. Dr Yeap Swan Sim, consultant rheumatologist and physician at Subang Jaya Medical Centre explains that women are more prone to osteoporosis because once they hit menopause, production of oestrogen, which prevents bone loss and thus osteoporosis, reduces significantly, causing bone density loss at a faster rate than normal.

On the other hand, men have higher levels of testosterone. Dr Yeap says, "Testosterone helps the body build bone, so in general, men have higher bone density than women. Besides that, men do not go through menopause and therefore do not experience a dramatic dip in testosterone levels as they get older."

Less likely, but not impossible

Men can still get osteoporosis even though their risk is lower. Dr Yeap observes that some men are in denial when diagnosed with osteoporosis, as they think it is something that only affects women.



Dr Yeap Swan Sim.

Osteoporosis occurs similarly in men, displaying no initial symptoms when their bones start to thin, and are usually diagnosed when they experience a low-trauma fracture (fracture from falling at standing height or lower).

Dr Yeap notes that men usually show osteoporosis symptoms from the age of 70, but various causes can lead to it manifesting earlier. For example, medications such as steroids and testosterone blockers can increase the risk of osteoporosis. Excessive alcohol can be detrimental to the bones as well.

Upping your chances for healthy bones

Dr Yeap describes the process of bone health throughout a person's lifetime. "Your bones grow as you age. Maximum bone growth occurs during your teenage years, and it will peak when you are around 30 to 35 years old."

Unfortunately, she says, after reaching peak bone mass, there will be gradual loss of bone. Thus, it is crucial to maximise peak bone mass and reduce age-related bone loss to increase your chances of preventing osteoporosis later in life.

"If you have higher peak bone mass, the chances of you reaching the danger zone of low bone mass/high fracture risk with age-related bone loss will be lower compared to those starting with a lower peak bone mass," she explains.

To ensure higher bone mass, Dr Yeap recommends adequate exercise and sufficient calcium and vitamin D intake. If you are taking medication with side effects that may increase your risk of developing osteoporosis, ask your doctor for alternatives or ways to reduce your risk. Smoking and drinking alcohol should be avoided as well.

Manageable with long-term treatment

As with many diseases, there is no cure for osteoporosis, but there are effective treatments available. Dr Yeap refutes the misconception that once you are diagnosed with osteoporosis, you only need to take calcium supplements and change your lifestyle. These are only preventative methods and you need medication to treat your osteoporosis. Even so, your bones will never recover their original strength and mass.

She says, "Most people will have already lost 30% of their bone mass by the time they are diagnosed. Taking medication can restore bone mass, but bone density increments are modest. At best, there will be a 10% increase after three years of treatment."

Hence, it is crucial for men to be aware that they too can develop osteoporosis, and everyone should start taking steps to raise or maintain their bone mass as much as possible.

■ For more information, call 03-5639 1212.

Should you screen for osteoporosis?

Osteoporosis is definitely a threat to all ageing men and women. Dr Yeap Swan Sim, consultant rheumatologist and physician at Subang Jaya Medical Centre, encourages those with an increased risk of osteoporosis to undergo bone density measurement.

"There is no point in waiting until a fracture happens to finally get yourself checked for osteoporosis," she says.

The Malaysian Osteoporosis Society advises all men above 70

to get their bone density measured. In addition, if you have the risk factors listed below, you should visit a doctor to check your bone health and bone density.

- Intake of steroids
- Intake of testosterone blockers
- Rheumatoid arthritis
- Family history of osteoporosis
- Regular alcohol consumption (a few drinks a day)
- Smoking
- Immobility or lack of physical activity