

Osteopenia

Consumer Factsheet



What is osteopenia?

Osteopenia is the term used by doctors to describe low bone density. People with osteopenia have bones that are weaker than normal, but not weak enough to be called osteoporosis. Osteopenia or low bone density is thought to affect around 6.3 million Australians, and is an early warning sign that you should be taking action to reduce your risk of developing osteoporosis and breaking a bone in the future.

What causes osteopenia?

There is usually no single cause. Many factors have an impact on bone strength, and the importance of these factors will be different for each person. Some people are more likely to develop osteopenia because poor bone health runs in the family. Medical conditions and medications can affect your risk. For example, osteopenia is more common in people who have coeliac disease (gluten or wheat allergy), and in people who take glucocorticoid medications (steroids) for long periods. Low body weight is another important risk factor; osteopenia is sometimes seen in young female athletes or in people with eating disorders. A natural weakening of the skeleton occurs with age, especially after menopause, so the risk of osteopenia increases greatly at this stage of life. An unhealthy lifestyle and not getting enough of the three important building blocks for good bone health - calcium, vitamin D and exercise - will also increase your risk of developing osteopenia.

What are the symptoms of osteopenia?

Osteopenia does not have any symptoms. You may not know you have a problem until you break a bone after a minor trip or fall. Once this happens, you could already have osteoporosis, and your risk of breaking another bone increases. This is why it is important to start protecting your bone health as early as possible, and to talk to your doctor about finding out if you are at risk of poor bone health.

Is there a test for osteopenia?

If your doctor thinks you are at risk of poor bone health, you may be referred for a bone density test. This simple scan measures the density (strength) of the bones in the hip and spine. The results will indicate if your bone density is normal, mildly reduced (osteopenia) or if you have osteoporosis. Medicare will cover some of the cost of your bone density test if you have certain risk factors for poor bone health.

Depending how low your bone density is, your doctor may refer you for a repeat bone density test. This will usually be two to five years after your first test. So that the results of the tests can be compared as accurately as possible, it is important that you try to have repeat tests done on the same bone density machine, or at the very least, at the same testing centre.

Will I get osteoporosis?

Not everyone with osteopenia will develop osteoporosis. Many different factors can influence your future bone health. Some are difficult to control, for example, your genes or your general health. The good news is that improving your diet and lifestyle can have a big impact on your bone strength. Cutting down your alcohol intake, quitting smoking, exercising regularly and getting enough calcium and vitamin D will all help to maintain your bone strength and reduce your risk of going on to develop osteoporosis. Lifestyle changes such as these can even *improve* bone strength in some circumstances.

Do I need treatment?

Treatment with osteoporosis medications usually isn't necessary if you have been diagnosed with osteopenia. Getting enough calcium and vitamin D, exercising regularly and leading a bone-friendly lifestyle are the best ways to protect and improve your bone strength.



You should talk to your doctor regularly about your diet, lifestyle and any changes to your bone health risk factors. If your calcium and vitamin D levels are low, you may need to take a supplement. It is important you discuss this first with your doctor. Osteoporosis Australia recommends a supplement of no more than 500-600mg of calcium per day.

If you have other factors that increase your risk of fracture (for example, you are elderly or you fall easily), your doctor may prescribe osteoporosis medications as a preventative treatment. Osteoporosis medication may also be prescribed to help prevent bone weakening if you are undergoing long-term treatment with steroids or if you are having treatment for breast cancer or prostate cancer. There are several safe and effective osteoporosis medications available - your doctor will determine the best treatment for you.

What can I do to look after my bones?

There are some simple but very important things you can do to protect your bones if you have osteopenia. Ensure you have adequate:

- Calcium – 3 serves of dairy foods daily, or increase your intake of other calcium rich foods.
- Vitamin D – get out in the sun for short periods on most days.
- Exercise – weight-bearing and resistance exercises at least 3 times a week.

Healthy lifestyle habits are also important for keeping bones strong. Don't smoke, keep your alcohol intake low and try to stay active in your daily life. More information about lifestyle choices for healthy bones can be found on the Osteoporosis Australia website.

