

What is the difference between osteoporosis and osteoarthritis?

By: M. Lynn Scovazzo, MD

These two terms sound similar and their meanings are easy to confuse. The prefix "osteo" means bone. The term "porosis" refers to the quality of the bone. Normal, sturdy, healthy bone tissue is built with a specific architecture. Depending on the specific bone (there are 208 bones in our bodies) there is an arrangement of minerals with spaces in between. This design allows each bone to be as light as it can possibly be, yet still be able to perform its duty of supporting the body against gravity, for example.

For adult bones, there are charts with values of normal bone density that have been measured for the hip, lumbar spine, and wrist bones. Finding out if your bones have normal density (or sturdiness) or possibly less than normal, can be done with a simple, inexpensive test called a DEXA scan. If the test shows that your bones are not as sturdy as they should be (this is called osteopenia), then there are some lifestyle changes including dietary and exercise recommendations that may improve your bone health over time. Individuals who have a more significant loss of their bone density may actually have a condition called "osteoporosis", and this may require treatment with medication to improve the bone strength. Bones that have reduced strength are more prone to fracture with trivial trauma. One way to visualize osteoporosis is to consider a sponge that has lots of air holes in it, with not very much sponge substance. This is compared to a sponge that is denser with lots of sponge and smaller holes throughout. The second sponge would be more like a normal bone.

The term "osteoarthritis" refers to the connections between the bones, which could involve a joint, such as the knee, wearing out and becoming stiff with limited function. The cartilage lining of the joint wears out and the joint often swells up and may become painful. Another area that could wear out is the discs between the vertebrae in our spines. This allows the spinal bones to settle in closer to one another and to possibly develop bone spurs, which decrease flexibility of the spine and may contribute to back pain.

Commonly used nutritional supplements, such as calcium with vitamin D, help provide the substances needed to allow your body to maintain a healthy skeleton in terms of reducing the risk of developing osteoporosis. The recommended daily amount of calcium and Vitamin D (this vitamin helps you absorb the calcium you eat) depends on the person's age. Peak bone mass is not reached until a person is in their late 20's or early 30's, which means drinking milk and getting enough calcium in your diet is not just for kids and teens!

A nutritional supplement that has been found to have some merit for treating early



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knee arthritis is glucosamine/chondroitin sulfate. Of course, eating a healthy diet and maintaining a proper body weight goes a long way towards keeping joints healthy and to reduce the risk of progression of early osteoarthritis.