- Bones

9 Ways To KEEP YOUR BONES STRONG

We can't see our bones and so it's easy to forget about them and the hugely important role they play in our health. Here are some ways to keep yours stronger for longer…



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IN BRITAIN, ALMOST FOUR MILLION people have osteoporosis and three quarters of them are women, which is a shocking statistic. So many of us go through life not realising our bones are weakening but there are things you can do to prevent and even reverse this decline. 'Your skeleton is made up of bones that provide your body with support, structure, stability and protection for vital organs,' says Dr Nicky Keay, a clinical lecturer at University College London and author of *Hormones, Health And Human Potential* (£16.99, Sequoia Books).

And after menopause, bone loss can increase dramatically due to the drop in oestrogen, as this hormone usually helps keep bones strong by slowing bone breakdown. While we can't prevent getting older, we can help minimise bone loss by doing weight training in young adulthood and then maintaining as much of it as possible to prevent or at least delay osteoporosis. 'By the time a woman reaches 65 she's already through the menopause and lost significant bone, which is why I think all women at 45 should be given a DXA bone scan,' says professor Moira O'Brien, osteoporosis consultant and president of the Irish Osteoporosis Society charity. 'I don't recommend HRT to protect bone health though – I only prescribe it for early menopause, debilitating symptoms and sometimes those with eating disorders,' she explains.

An exercise programme can also help to build up bone strength. 'I recommend you visit the Irish or UK's Osteoporosis Society website and follow their exercise advice, as starting yoga, for example, can actually be dangerous for someone with already weakened bones, as all the forward bending can cause excess stress on the back bones and trigger fractures,' says professor O'Brien.

Here are nine ways you can support and keep your bones strong:

1 AVOID YO-YO DIETING

'Repeatedly losing and regaining weight over many years can reduce your bone density,' says Lorna Cooke, a dietitian from the Sports Institute of Northern Ireland in Belfast. 'When you're restricting food, key hormones needed to maintain bone can be affected,' she explains. 'Plus, a lack of nutrients such as calcium when following a restrictive diet can also lead to long-term deficiencies affecting bone health – because when the body doesn't get enough calcium from food, it takes calcium from bones, which can weaken them over time. By eating regular, well-balanced meals, healthy habits can be stuck to, meaning the weight is more likely to stay off in the long run.'

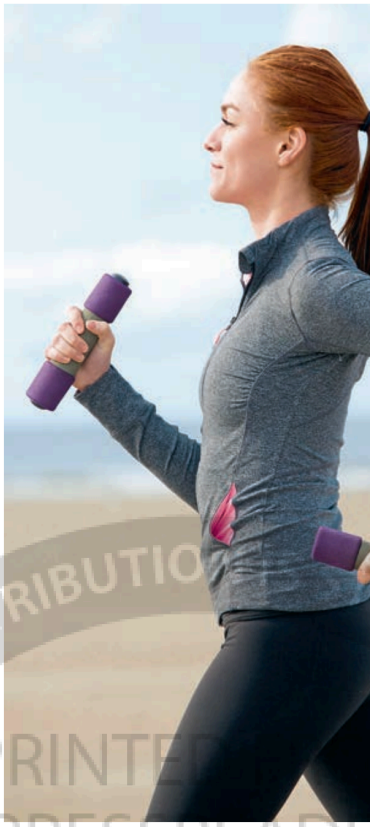
TRY IT

Take a bone-boosting supplement that contains 1,000mg calcium and at least 10mcg/400iu vitamin D3.

2 KEEP ACTIVE

Physical activity is very important for bone health, but the right type and amount is key. 'Those who aren't physically active are at higher risk for bone loss,' says professor O'Brien. 'Unfortunately, most of us do too little and our risk of brittle bones much earlier in life increases if we do next to no physical activity,' adds Dr Eamon Laird, researcher in health and ageing at Trinity College Dublin.

'Adults should aim for at least 30 minutes activity per day, which should include weight-bearing exercises such as walking or jogging in order to strengthen and maintain bone health,' says Dr Laird.



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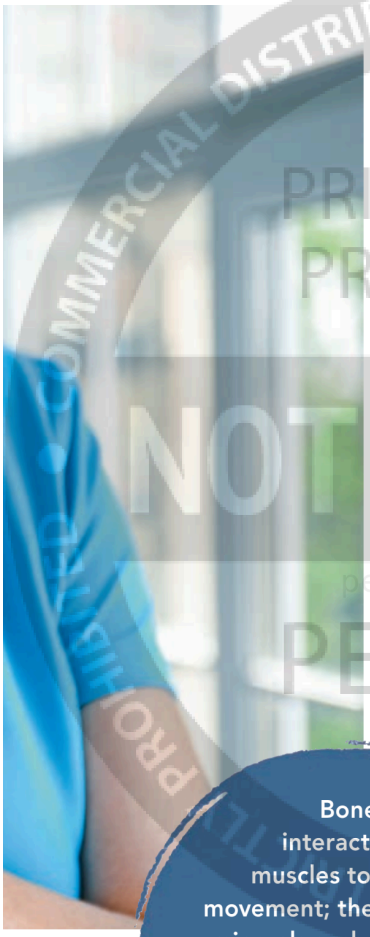


3 AVOID ULTRA PROCESSED FOODS

Rob Hobson, a nutritionist working with Healthspan, says: 'The nutrient-deficient nature of a diet high in ultra-processed foods (UPFs) may negatively impact bone health. To protect your bones, try to limit the amount of UPFs you eat each day and make more meals from scratch.'

4 CONSUME DAIRY

'Milk and dairy products, such as cheese and yoghurt, are great sources of calcium, so excluding them from your diet can lead to deficiencies in calcium and vitamin D – and a greater risk of osteoporosis later in life,' says Lorna.

'Getting enough calcium is crucial for bone health,' adds Dr Richard Allison, consultant in performance nutrition and clinical dietitian at ISEH, part of HCA Healthcare UK (hcahealthcare.co.uk). 'Adults require 1,000mg calcium daily. Women over age 50 and men over 70 need to increase calcium intake to 1,200mg. Although dairy products like cheese, milk and yoghurt are excellent sources of calcium, some people cannot, or choose not to, consume dairy.

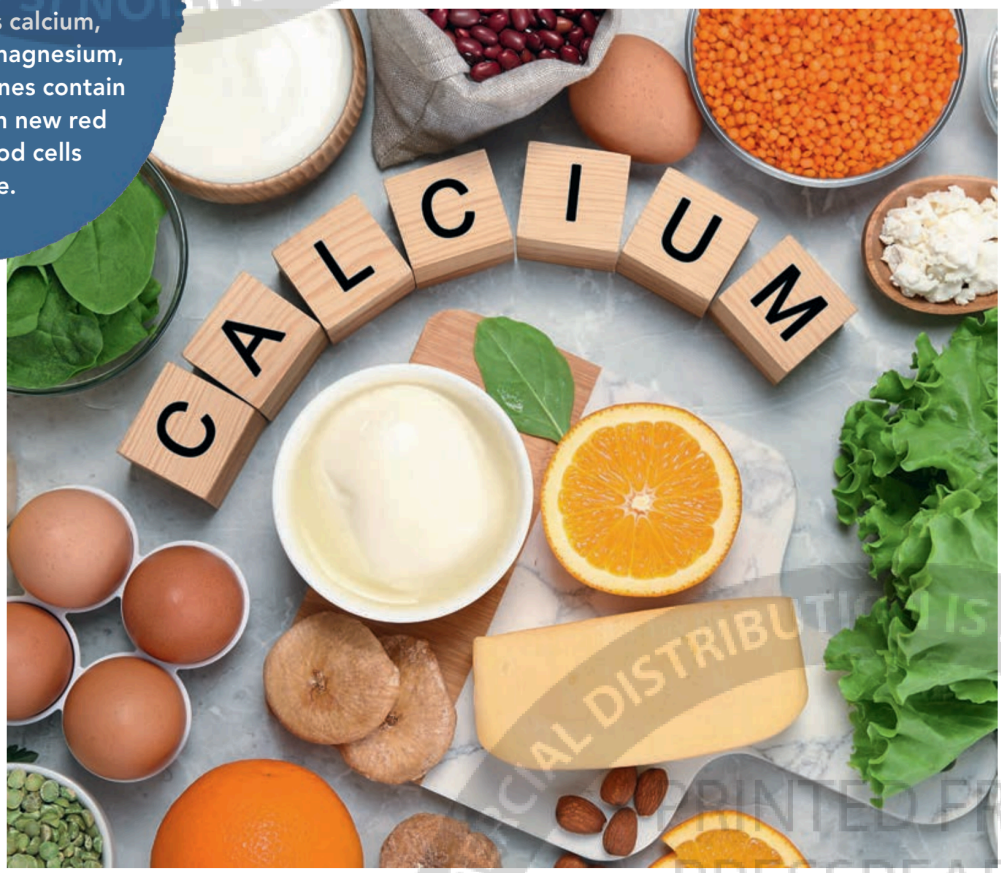
'If you're cutting out dairy, be sure to replace it with calcium-rich alternatives such as fortified foods (bread, non-dairy milks), plant-based proteins (tofu, nuts and seeds), leafy greens, dried fruit and pulses,' adds Lorna. 'A supplement could help if you're struggling to eat enough.'

5 CARE FOR YOUR GUT

'The intestinal damage caused by conditions such as coeliac disease, Crohn's disease and colitis, if left untreated or undiagnosed, can lead to poor absorption of key nutrients including calcium and vitamin D,' says Lorna. 'Over the long term, this can lead to osteoporosis and an increased risk of broken bones. Early diagnosis of these disorders and, in some cases, adherence to a strict diet – advised by a dietitian – is key in allowing the intestinal lining to repair and start to absorb nutrients again.'

Bones interact with muscles to enable movement; they also store minerals such as calcium, phosphorus and magnesium, and some long bones contain marrow, in which new red and white blood cells are made.





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6 QUIT CIGARETTES AND ALCOHOL

'Both alcohol and smoking vastly increase your risk of osteoporosis,' says Dr Laird. 'Smoking disrupts the body's ability to make bone and can actually speed up bone loss, while alcohol can interfere with the body's balance of calcium, which slows the formation of new bone tissue.'

The advised alcohol limit for women is no more than 11 standard drinks per week, with at least two alcohol-free days.

7 GET SOME SUN – BUT DON'T BURN!

'If you're using sunscreen in the summer months, just remember that it blocks the formation of vitamin D,' says Dr Laird. But while it's never a good idea to burn – therefore you shouldn't ditch SPF completely – try getting a little exposure without sunscreen to give your body the chance to make enough Vitamin D.

If Caucasian, around 20 minutes a day in the sun is enough for vitamin D production, and the darker your skin, the longer you'd need – go by what your skin can tolerate. Avoid letting it get too hot and red.

And now's the time to top up on vitamin D as during winter your skin won't make any as the UVB rays aren't strong enough here in the UK – unless you head abroad on holiday and then you're covered!

8 HAVE A BONE SCAN

Some conditions – such as a hyperactive thyroid – can increase the body's natural rate of bone loss. A booklet by Viridian Nutrition with GP Dr Siobhan Brennan called *Medication + Nutrition For Optimal Support* delves into the many medications that can impact on bone health including some weight loss drugs, steroids, cancer drugs, anti-depressants, reflux, and proton pump inhibitors.

'Anyone on medication – or with a condition – that causes bone loss, should be given a baseline DXA scan to find out what condition their bone health is in so that a bone protection plan can be started,' explains professor O'Brien.

9 Take a supplement



Virdian Bone Complex (£29.35, viridian-nutrition.com) includes K2 as well calcium and magnesium, vitamins D, C and other minerals. Vitamin K2 plays a key role in bone health as it regulates blood calcium levels, directing minerals away from soft tissues into the bones.



Healthspan Osteo Complete (£22.95, healthspan.co.uk) contains calcium, magnesium, vitamin D3, zinc, copper and boron and may help with hormonal imbalances that may be causing menstrual irregularities.



Revive Active Joint Complex (£39.95, reviveactive.com) contains 10 active ingredients including marine collagen, MSM, glucosamine and hyaluronic acid to support not only bones but cartilage, connective tissue and muscle function.

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