- Bones

CHALLENGE

Strengthen Your Bones

It's time to double down on the habits that will keep your skeleton sturdy.

BY GINA WAY

You may think of weak bones as something only the elderly need to worry about, but by the time you turn the big 4-0, your bone density starts to decline, says Vonda Wright, M.D., a double-board-certified orthopedic sports surgeon in Orlando, FL, and the author of *Unbreakable: A Woman's Guide to Aging With Power*. "Women are four times as likely to experience bone loss as men, and up to 15% of that loss can happen during perimenopause," she says.

A steady process of bone renewal and remodeling is critical to maintaining bone strength: Osteoclast cells inside bones break down and dissolve old or damaged bone tissue so osteoblast cells can build strong new bone to replace it, explains Dr. Wright. Estrogen is critical for the balance of building and breakdown of bones; without much estrogen, breakdown outpaces building, which significantly speeds up bone loss. But here's the empowering part: "Bones are dynamic and adaptive, so there are lots of ways to make them stronger, depending on what you eat and the physical impact you subject them to," says Dr. Wright. They are not static structural I-beams, she adds, but "living metabolic structures that are remodeled continuously." And while having strong bones won't stop you from tripping and falling, it can hopefully protect you from fractures if you do.

THE BUILD-STRONGER-BONES CHALLENGE

1 DO HIGH-IMPACT CARDIO.

Jumping rope, jogging, hiking, and playing tennis and pickleball are all weight-bearing activities that provide dynamic impact, the kind of force that improves bone density by stimulating osteoblasts to produce

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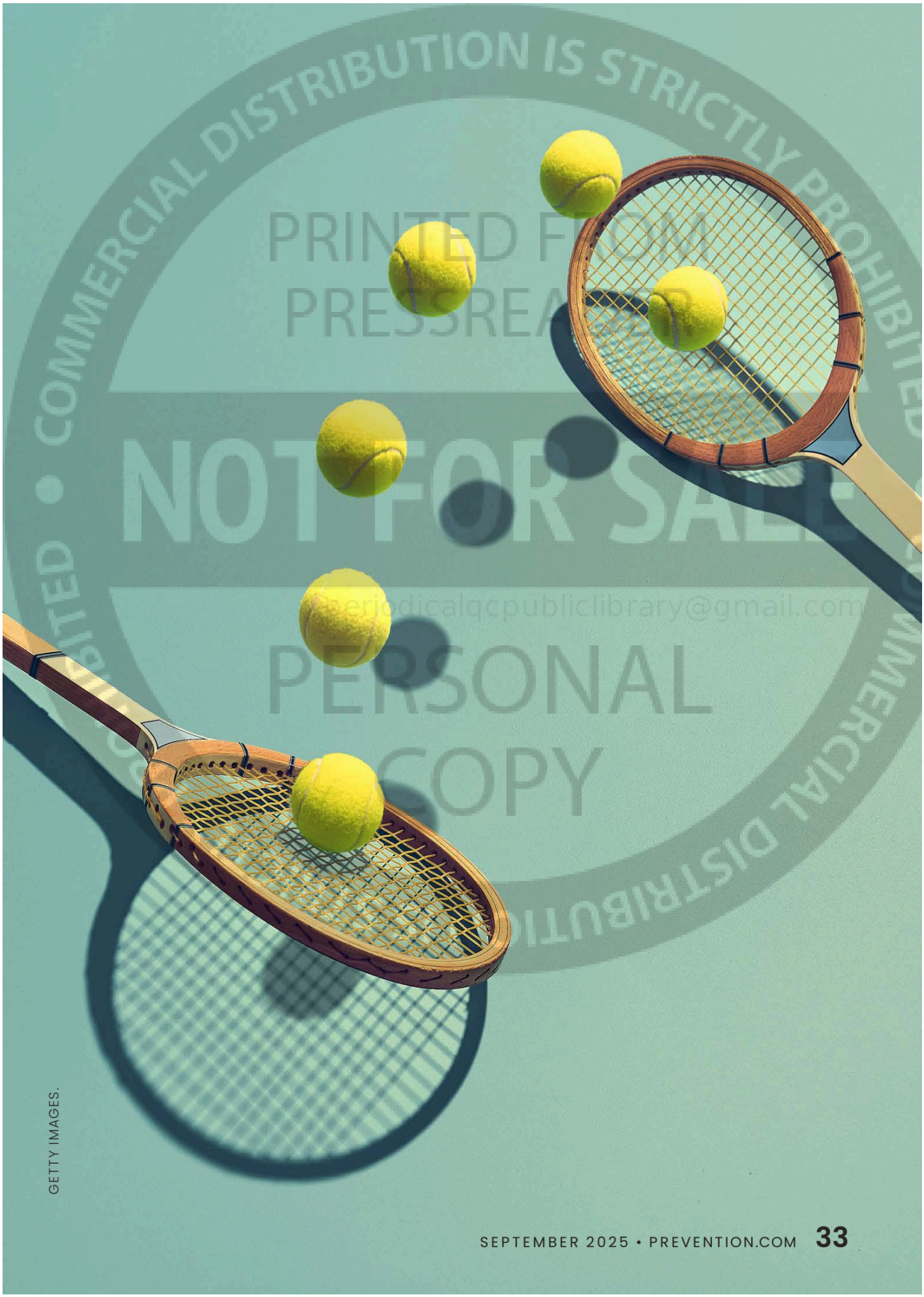

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more bone. "The more 'good stress' you can safely put on your bones, the more it triggers them to grow denser and meet the demand that's put on them," says Robert Brace, founder of Brace Life Studios in New York City.

BONE HEALTH BONUS:

Take it up a notch by jumping rope for one minute or adding short interval jogs to your walking routine. "Doing some old-school jumping jacks works too," says Brace.

2 ADD STRENGTH TRAINING.

"Muscles and bones work together as a team," says Brace. "As muscles pull against bones, the force signals the bones to get stronger. Muscles also protect bones by absorbing impact." Research shows that doing resistance exercises can help you build a stronger, more resilient musculoskeletal system and preserve bone mass. This can be as simple as holding a plank position (or a modified plank, with your knees on the ground) for at least 30 seconds, repeating it three times. "Doing wall push-ups, squats, or glute bridges [hip raises done while lying on your back] will put stress throughout the body to help build and maintain muscle and bone mass," says Brace.

BONE HEALTH BONUS:

Increase the amount of weight you lift. "You might start with five pounds and move up to 10 pounds over time. Just make sure you're able to complete three sets of 10 repetitions without sacrificing form," says Brace. Doing moves like squats and lunges while holding weights not only builds strength but also boosts balance and stability.

3 EAT MORE CALCIUM.

"Calcium is essential for maintaining strong bones, and it's in everything from dairy to plant-based foods such as leafy greens as well as tofu and almonds," says the Good Housekeeping Institute's Registered Dietitian Nutritionist, Stefani Sassos. "You'll also find it in fortified foods like plant-based milks and orange juice."

BONE HEALTH BONUS:

Try to get 1,000 mg of calcium from whole foods daily. One cup of reduced-fat milk has 309 mg, and a cup of plain low-fat Greek yogurt gives you 263 mg. A handful of almonds (around 20) has 76 mg, and a cup of cooked collard greens boasts a whopping 268 mg. It all adds up—but if you don't think you're getting enough calcium through your diet, ask your doctor about taking a daily supplement.

4 UP YOUR INTAKE OF VITAMIN D AND OTHER BONE BUILDERS.

"While calcium is the It girl of a bone-building diet, other nutrients are just as important to overall bone health," says Sassos. "Vitamin D helps the body absorb calcium from food. It's dubbed 'the sunshine

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vitamin,' since your skin can make it via UV exposure, but fatty fish such as salmon and canned tuna are good sources too, and so are egg yolks and milk." (It is difficult to get enough vitamin D from sunshine alone.) Magnesium and vitamin K also support calcium absorption, and protein is critical for maintaining both muscle and bone mass.

BONE HEALTH BONUS: Prunes are a surprising bone booster. A 2022 study found that eating five to six per day helped preserve the bone density of postmenopausal women. "Prunes are a hidden nutrition gem—they are rich in not only vitamin K but also magnesium and antioxidants," says Sassos.

5 PRACTICE BALANCE AND GOOD POSTURE.

While these things are not direct bone builders, they are critical for the support and protection of bones. "Correct alignment and posture are essential to prevent injuries and increase the positive stress that helps build bone density. I call it 'fierce form,' " says Brace. His mantra is a good one to repeat to yourself throughout the day: *Chest up. Shoulder blades back.*

BONE HEALTH BONUS: "Balance is the key to stability and coordination, which reduces the risk of falls. It also strengthens your core, which helps protect your spine and hip bones," says Brace. Each year about a million older adults wind up in the hospital for fall-related injuries, according to the CDC. Add one-sided moves like single-leg lifts and tree pose to your routine and hold for at least 30 seconds on each leg. You could also try balancing on one foot as you brush your teeth in the morning and evening.

WHEN TO SEE A DOCTOR ABOUT YOUR BONE HEALTH

The CDC recommends a bone-density (DEXA) scan for women 65 and older to screen for osteoporosis, a condition defined by brittle, porous bones that are susceptible to fracture. Your health provider may suggest an earlier screening if you're over 50 and have one of the risk factors for osteoporosis, which include a family history of the disease or a previous fracture. "Other risk factors include autoimmune disorders that cause you to take corticosteroids as well as smoking, which is poison to bones," says Dr. Wright. "If you have one of the risk factors for poor bone health, your doctor may recommend a DEXA scan at any age to assess and monitor your bone health."

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