

Coeliac disease and osteoporosis

Consumer Factsheet



Coeliac disease and osteoporosis

Osteoporosis is a condition in which the bones become fragile, leading to a higher risk of breaks or fractures. A minor bump or fall can be enough to cause a break in someone with osteoporosis. Osteoporosis is one of the most common health problems associated with coeliac disease. This factsheet explains how coeliac disease can affect your bones, how to find out if you are at risk of osteoporosis, and what you can do to help protect your bone health.

How does coeliac disease affect the bones?

Coeliac disease affects the ability of the bowel to absorb vitamins, minerals and other nutrients from food. Calcium, the mineral that gives bones their strength and structure, is poorly absorbed by people with coeliac disease. Low calcium absorption over a long period, particularly during childhood and adolescence when the skeleton is growing, may increase the risk of osteoporosis and bone fractures in later life. Vitamin D, important for the proper absorption of calcium from the bowel, may also be lower in people with coeliac disease. Severe vitamin D deficiency can cause rickets in children and osteomalacia ('soft bones') in adults, both associated with increased risk of breaking a bone.

Could I be at risk of osteoporosis?

If coeliac disease was diagnosed in childhood or adolescence and you have followed a gluten-free diet since, your bone health is unlikely to be affected. If you were diagnosed in adulthood after several years of symptoms, calcium absorption will have been low for some time, and your bones may be weakened. Even with a late diagnosis, keeping your coeliac disease under control with a strict gluten-free diet can help rebuild bone strength and reduce your risk of developing osteoporosis.

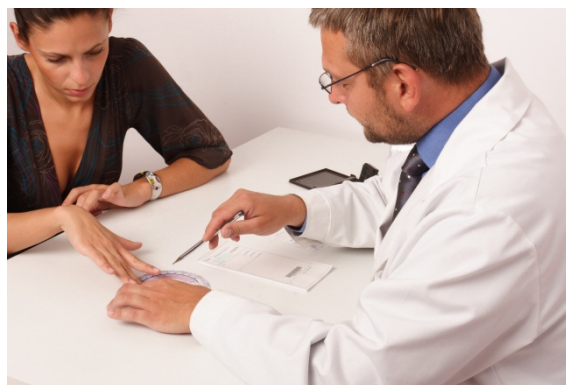
Other factors may add to your overall osteoporosis risk. Your age, other health problems and medications, and your diet and lifestyle can all affect bone health. Hormone changes that come with menopause also have an impact on bone strength. Your doctor will take into account these factors when assessing your risk of osteoporosis.

Do I need an osteoporosis test?

Younger people who have their coeliac disease under control are unlikely to need an osteoporosis test. If you were diagnosed with coeliac disease as an adult, you may need a test to find out whether your bones have been weakened. This is particularly important if you are older or have other risk factors.

The test for osteoporosis is a simple scan that measures the density of the bones in the hip and spine. The results indicate if your bone density is normal, mildly reduced (osteopenia) or if you have osteoporosis. Some of the cost of a bone density scan can be claimed from Medicare if you have been diagnosed with coeliac disease.

Most people don't know they have osteoporosis until they have had a fracture. That's why it's important to discuss your bone health with your doctor as soon as possible after diagnosis so that you can take action to prevent osteoporosis.





Osteoporosis medications

People with very low bone strength may need osteoporosis medications. There are several safe and effective medications available - your doctor will determine the best treatment for you. Osteoporosis medications have been shown to reduce the risk of breaking a bone by up to 60%, but to work effectively, they usually need to be taken over several years. If you have been prescribed osteoporosis medication, it is important to keep taking it. If you are concerned about any aspect of your osteoporosis treatment, you should discuss this with your doctor as soon as possible.

What else can I do to protect my bones?

Other ways to help keep your bones strong include:

- Regular weight bearing and resistance exercise.
- Don't smoke.
- Keep your alcohol intake low.

More information about lifestyle choices for healthy bones can be found on the [Osteoporosis Australia website](#).

The importance of calcium and vitamin D



Following a strict gluten-free diet and eating calcium-rich foods every day will help improve bone strength. Dairy foods are the best source of calcium - 3 servings a day are usually enough to achieve the recommended 1000mg calcium per day for adults (1300mg for women who have reached menopause and men over 60). Other gluten-free sources of calcium include tinned

fish, dried fruits and firm tofu. If you have difficulty getting enough calcium through your diet, a calcium supplement may be needed. You should discuss this with your doctor first. Osteoporosis Australia recommends a supplement of 500-600mg per day.

You may need a blood test to check your vitamin D levels. The best source of vitamin D is sunlight on the skin. Being outside for 5 to 10 minutes a day in summer, longer in winter, is usually enough for those with fair to medium skin. If your vitamin D levels are low, a supplement may be needed – it is best to discuss this with your doctor. More information about safe sun exposure for vitamin D can be found on the Osteoporosis Australia website.

