



Women's health

Worried about osteoporosis? See your dentist

Osteoporosis, a bone disorder that affects 10 million Americans, weakens bones by lowering their density. The disease may strike either gender at any age, but women older than 50 have the highest occurrence of osteoporosis.

Unfortunately, most patients are not diagnosed with osteoporosis until a major fracture occurs. However, people with low bone mass may experience oral health problems that their dentist can identify as the first stages of osteoporosis.

Your dentist may detect osteoporosis early based on your medical history and a dental exam including x-rays. Your medical history will provide information about risk factors such as heredity, calcium deficiency, smoking, menopause, excessive caffeine or alcohol use and an inactive lifestyle. Dental x-rays may show decreased bone density in the jawbone and the bone around the teeth from year to year, which can indicate advancing stages of the disease.

Sources: Delta Dental, Academy of General Dentistry

Trivia time:

Why is bone health a public health issue?

Answer: Osteoporosis is much more common than other diseases that are considered public-health threats. For instance, a woman's risk of breaking a hip is equal to her combined risk of breast, uterine and ovarian cancer.

Signs of osteoporosis in women

There are several signs that alert dentists to the possibility of osteoporosis:

- **Bone loss in the jaw.** This may be a sign of bone loss in other parts of the body.
- **Tooth loss.** Studies suggest that women with low bone mineral density tend to lose more teeth.
- **Ill-fitting dentures.** Women age 50 and older with osteoporosis need new dentures three times more often than women the same age without osteoporosis.
- **Gum disease.** Gingivitis contributes to bone loss.

Sources: Delta Dental, Academy of General Dentistry

5 ways to keep your bones healthy

If your dentist suspects you have osteoporosis, you may be referred to a doctor for assessment and treatment. You can also keep your bones healthy by:

- Getting enough calcium, in your diet or with supplements (women up to age 65, 1,200 mg; women older than 65, 1,500 mg)
- Adding vitamin D to your diet
- Exercising regularly
- Quitting smoking
- Decreasing caffeine and alcohol intake

If you are considering supplements, talk to your doctor to make sure you're getting the vitamins and minerals that are right for your unique health needs.

Sources: Delta Dental, Academy of General Dentistry