Osteoporosis and Osteoarthritis: What’s the Difference?

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Osteoporosis and Osteoarthritis

Osteoporosis and osteoarthritis are both bone diseases, however, that is about all they have in common. Since both of these conditions can be debilitating, people tend to get them confused.

What is Osteoporosis?

Osteoporosis is a bone disease where the bones become weak and less dense and are more likely to cause fractures and other painful problems.

The International Osteoporosis Foundation reports 200 million women worldwide are affected by osteoporosis.

Additionally, in the United States, it is estimated there are 44 million people with either osteoporosis or low bone mass, and that number could be up to 61 million if the current trend continues.

Osteoporosis causes back pain, loss of height and changes to posture, this according to the NIH Osteoporosis and Related Bone Diseases National Resource Center. It may also affect your ability to walk and cause permanent disability.

Bone loss occurs gradually over many years, and there are no symptoms to tell you what is happening. A healthy lifestyle is the best way to prevent bone loss and lower the chances of a fracture.

While osteoporosis doesn’t cause symptoms, but you may start to notice signs, including:

- Back pain
- Loss of height
- Curved Posture

For some people, the first sign of osteoporosis is a broken bone, usually a hip or on the spine. And if the condition gets severe, regular activity from sitting, bending or standing can cause painful fractures.

You may heal from a fracture with osteoporosis, but it may take longer and cause long lasting pain. The previously injured joint may continue to feel stiff and give you trouble with activity.

Some factors can increase your likelihood of developing osteoporosis, including:

- **Being female.** Women are more likely to develop osteoporosis than men, but men do get osteoporosis especially after age 70.
- **Age.** The older you get, the greater your risk.
- **Race.** Whites and Asians have the highest risk.

- **Family.** Having a parent with this condition puts you at increased risk.
- If have a **smaller body frame** because there is less bone to draw from as you get older.
- **Hormones**, including lowered sex hormones, too much thyroid, and overactive parathyroid and adrenal glands.
- **Dietary factors**, including a lifelong lack of calcium and history of gastrointestinal surgery.
- Long-term use of **steroid medicines**.
- Certain **medical conditions**, including rheumatoid arthritis and lupus.
- **Bad habits** including lack of activity, excessive alcohol consumption, and tobacco use.

Osteoporosis is diagnosed by measuring bone density using a machine with low-level imaging to determine mineral quantities in your bones.

Treatments are based on the chances of your breaking a bone in the next ten years as determined by bone density testing. If your doctor determines your risk for fracture is low, then treatment will be based on modifying risk factors for bone loss and falls.

The most commonly prescribed medications for osteoporosis are bisphosphonates, which are a class of drugs that work to prevent bone loss. Other medications to treat osteoporosis are those that act like estrogen (female sex hormone) and help maintain bone mass.

What is Osteoarthritis?

Osteoarthritis (OA) is a painful, degenerative joint disease affecting over 35 million American adults, this according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

OA often involves the hips, knees, neck, back and/or the small joints of your hands. OA affects joints that have previously been injured, that are worn from repeated overuse, or that are in areas of excess body weight.

Through overuse and injury, the cartilage that cushions the joints becomes worn and thin, and as a result, the bones rub together, causing a grafting feeling. Joint flexibility decreases, bone spurs form and joints swell.

Risk factors for osteoarthritis include:

- Age
- Being a woman
- Having excess body weight
- Joint injuries
- Repetitive stress on a particular joint from certain jobs placing
- Family history
- Having bone deformities

The first sign of OA is pain that worsens with mobility and activity. Osteoarthritis symptoms progress slowly and worsen over time.

Symptoms include:

- Pain during or after movement
- Tenderness when pressure is applied
- Joint stiffness upon waking or sitting for long periods
- Loss of range of motion in joints
- A grating feeling in the bone
- Bone spurs – additional bone fragments that feel like hard lumps and form around the affected joints.

Treatment of OA may include topical creams, nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) and analgesics, exercises and physical therapy, joint splinting, and as a last resort, joint replacement surgery for joints that are

severely damaged.

Are the Two Conditions Related?

Osteoporosis and OA are two different conditions, but the two can cause back problems, and affect you as you get older. If your back is giving your serious problems, your doctor may request a back x-ray to determine whether your pain is a result of a spine fracture or from degeneration of spinal joints.

Some studies have shown that people with osteoarthritis are less likely to develop osteoporosis because they have bones that are larger and thicker which give them more bone strength and decreases the likelihood of fractures.

However, people with autoimmune arthritis, such as rheumatoid arthritis and lupus, are more likely to develop osteoporosis.

What If You Have Both Diseases?

If you suffer from both osteoporosis and osteoarthritis, you should talk to your doctor about a treatment plan that manages both conditions and pays particular attention to being safe while exercising.

People with osteoporosis must take care to avoid activities that include bending forward, twisting the spine or lifting weights. People with OA must compensate for their limited mobility.

The Takeaway

Being aware of the differences with osteoporosis and osteoarthritis is important. Both these conditions can affect your quality of life even though they do it in different ways.

Since you know they are part of the aging process, it is important to work on avoiding the lifestyle habits that lead to them. If you have risk factors you cannot control, it’s important to be proactive in seeking advice from your doctor about testing and treatments to prevent further problems.