How to Read Your Osteoporosis T-Score

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T-Score Osteoporosis: What Does Your Score Mean?

As we age, our bones naturally lose some of their density.

I always think about my own bone health since I was diagnosed with osteopenia over 10 years ago. While this bone loss is natural and dependent on many lifestyle factors, some individuals, like me, are at a greater risk of too much bone loss. This can lead to osteoporosis. How is this condition diagnosed? Usually it surrounds a T-score for osteoporosis.

What Is Osteoporosis?

Osteoporosis is a bone disease that results in the loss and weakening of bone at a higher rate than what is typically expected from just aging. As bone loss does not present any symptoms, it often goes unnoticed and undiagnosed. Many people do not learn they have osteoporosis until they suffer a bone fracture. When a person has osteoporosis, they lose bone density too quickly, resulting in frail bones. Treatment for osteoporosis is targeted at slowing or preventing this bone loss.

When bone loss occurs, there is an increased risk of a fragility fracture, even from a minor fall or another small injury. Frail bones are at a greater risk for fracture, which can result in life-limiting injuries or worse.

Osteoporosis can also cause lowered mobility, it can negatively impact independence, worsen the quality of life and cause significant pain from fractures. Severe fractures can also lead to death. Osteopenia is a precursor to osteoporosis, as those who have it have an increased risk of developing osteoporosis. Someone diagnosed with osteopenia has a lower bone density than what is considered normal, but not as severe as those with osteoporosis.

How Is Osteoporosis Diagnosed?

If you are at risk for developing osteoporosis or are worried about your bone density, it’s essential to speak to your health care professional. If they are concerned about your bone density, your doctor may recommend a painless, non-invasive test called a Bone Density Test, also known as a Bone Mass Test. The test is much like getting an x-ray done, but with less radiation. This test is a way to diagnose osteopenia and osteoporosis based on how dense your bones are, usually measured at the hip and spine. These test results are reported as a T-score, and your doctor will review this score with you and what it means for your health.

What Is a T-Score?

A T-score is a term used to describe how dense your bones are, usually measured at your spine or hip. This score is a method of determining how strong your bones are compared to an average young adult at age 30 of the same gender.

Your T-score results from the bone mass test and the measurement units are known as standard deviations or SDs. So, your bone mass density test will reveal how much your bone density deviates from what is considered normal and healthy. Remember, a bone that has lost too much density is no longer strong, and it is at risk of a fracture.

What Does My T-Score Mean?

A good T-score is one that indicates your bones are of a healthy density; a good score will be no more than 1 SD below what is considered normal. As the T-score falls on a range, where you fall on this range will determine your risk and whether you have healthy bones, osteopenia, or osteoporosis. According to the World Health Organization (WHO):

- A good T-score result is -1.0 or above, indicating a normal or healthy bone density.
- A T-score that falls between -1.0 and -2.5 indicates that you have low bone density, also known as osteopenia.
- A T-score that falls at -2.5 or lower means that you have osteoporosis.

Simply put, the lower your T-score, the lower your bone density is, which puts you at an increased risk of a painful fracture. While no bone density test is entirely accurate, having the test done and reviewing your T-score with your health care team is an essential step in understanding your bone health. Your doctor will make treatment and lifestyle recommendations based on your T-score, as well as all of your other health factors.

How Is Osteoporosis Treated?

Suppose your T-score reveals that you have a low bone density (osteopenia or osteoporosis), or you meet the diagnostic criteria and are at risk for either. In that case, your doctor may recommend medications and lifestyle changes. Lifestyle changes may mean improving your diet to include more calcium and vitamin D and adding regular exercise to your routine. Treatment may also consist of osteoporosis medications such as bisphosphonates and calcitonin. While your healthcare team will make decisions with you regarding medication, in general, those with T-scores above -1.0 do not need medication. If your T-score is lower than this, your doctor will likely recommend some form of osteoporosis medication.

Your health care team will respond to your T-score by considering many factors, such as your overall health. The treatment they recommend will factor in your bone density, general health, as well as your nutrition, and how often you exercise. It’s essential to be your own advocate.

The Takeaway

I prepare for my doctor’s visits by recording my questions and concerns about my osteopenia. I also follow my health care team’s guidance on proper nutrition and exercise to keep my bones as healthy as possible. Remember that your best life includes regular exercise, balanced and healthy nutrition, and a reliable emotional support system!