Yoga for Osteoporosis

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How to Use Yoga to Heal and Strengthen Your Bones

Osteoporosis and its precursor, osteopenia, are common conditions that are becoming more prevalent with each passing day.

It's estimated that over 54 million Americans suffer from osteoporosis today; an aging population means that more Americans will be at risk for developing fractures of the hip, spine, and limbs in the years to come.

Luckily, yoga is also a growing phenomenon in North America, and that's very good news for those with low bone density.

Yoga has been shown to help regenerate bone mineral and slow the march of the disease, which could lift your osteoporosis limitations and dramatically improve your quality of life.

However, jumping right into a yoga routine at your local studio is not the best approach for better bone health. You'll need to bring patience, self-awareness, and an open mind to your yoga practice in order to see positive and permanent results.

How Yoga Can Help

It has long been known that progressive-resistance exercise – any dynamic activity where you move your body up and down against gravity – can strengthen your bones and prevent further bone density loss.

That's how people who run, jog, jump rope, and do high-impact aerobics have been able to protect their bones as they age, especially after menopause when a drop in estrogen eats away at bone mass. (For men, bones begin to thin out around age 70, when testosterone begins to drop.)

Certain yoga sequences fall into this realm of progressive-resistance exercise; others complement your regular aerobic routine with some anaerobic resistance, which also helps build the bones.

As you continue to exercise in these ways, your bones will react by changing shape and getting larger in diameter. So, even though the bone regeneration process slows as you age, you maintain a healthy structure in your skeleton – and that means less risk of fractures and breaks.

The Best Yoga Postures for Osteoporosis

Not surprisingly, some yoga can stress the body too much if you already have bone or joint issues. It may not seem as high-impact as running, but yoga can involve extremely powerful movements and demanding sequences that could leave you hurting rather than healing.

Next page: weight bearing postures and poses to avoid.

The Best Yoga Postures for Osteoporosis

Regardless of which type of yoga you decide on, focus on these types of movements to build up your bones:

Jumping Transitions

Plenty of poses call for a hop or jump to get into the next posture, and those are especially healthy for your skeleton.

Bumping your feet forward to a squat from Downward Dog, snapping them together from a straddle stance to Mountain Pose, or kicking one leg through your arms from Plank to a hamstring stretch are all good options.

These movements can be challenging and depend on muscle strength, so they're generally reserved for those who are already fairly fit.

Weight-Bearing Postures

Stillness breeds strength – in the right circumstances. Sitting in a chair may not do much for your body, but weight-bearing exercises like stretching out in Plank position or holding your body up in Table Pose for as little as a minute are excellent ways to tone your abdomen and the muscles around your spine.

Holding the pose with good form and as little movement as possible is the key to improvement, but anyone at any fitness level can take on the challenge.

Resistance Moves

These are the strengthening postures that lie somewhere between springing into the air and remaining motionless. Push-ups, and their many variations, are integral to many sorts of yoga, and they can be one of the quickest and most effective ways to build important shoulder and back muscles that you need for good posture and spinal alignment.

These should be slow, conscious movements, but if you're new to the push-up, you don't have to start on the ground: using a wall for resistance, you can ease yourself into the motion without straining yours muscles.

Postures to Avoid

As for the *worst* postures for brittle bones, many doctors and yoga instructors agree that convex movement of the spine – that is, rounding your back – brings the most risk.

There are yoga poses that involve arching your back, then rounding your back, which may seem relatively easy on your bones, but could actually lead to tiny fractures in the vertebrae.

Spinal twists could also cause problems, but on the other hand they can be very strengthening as well. Speak with your doctor and yoga instructor about how far to take these sorts of poses.

Next page: protecting your bones.

Take Precautions to Protect your Bones

The ultimate reward for regular yoga practice is a stronger, more substantial skeleton, but you must be careful to avoid sabotaging your own efforts.

Whenever you begin a new yoga practice, start slowly and keep a few important points in mind as you get stronger and begin to push your body further:

Keep Your Expectations in Check

Remember that yoga requires time and patience, so don't expect to see significant results overnight. A small pilot study led by Dr. Loren Fishman reported that 10 minutes of yoga each day increased bone mineral density without causing injury, but not everybody sees such an improvement.

In fact, Fishman's continuing research shows that only half of patients who continued their therapeutic yoga practice for two years experienced improvement in their spinal bone density. This isn't to say you shouldn't give yoga a try; rather, combine your yoga with appropriate lifestyle changes and any medication your doctor has prescribed to see the greatest benefits.

Make Modifications

One great aspect of yoga is its flexibility: there are a number of variations to make the poses more comfortable and less challenging if your strength or flexibility is lacking.

It's very important to listen to your body and resist the urge to push yourself further. Even a few inches too far can mean the difference between building bone and breaking bone.

Yoga experts will emphasize a balance of effort and ease, alertness and relaxation; if you concentrate too much on one weight bearing movement or muscle-taxing manoeuvre, you will very likely injure yourself, or at least push your practice two steps back.

Find the Right Instructor

There are hundreds of qualified yoga instructors from coast to coast, but it could take a bit of searching to find the best instructor for *you*. In fact, it may be better to sign up for a private class with a yoga instructor who has worked with osteoporosis patients before (or else has a good understanding of the limitations that come with the disease).

When your instructor can give you his or her full attention, it's easier for them to help you stay in perfect form, which is essential for proper weight distribution, and will lower your risk of developing stress fractures.

Strive for Balance

Your yoga practice should also focus on balance – both in the muscles, and between the mind and body.

Stable, passive poses like Savasana (Corpse Pose), Pranayama, and meditation may not directly strengthen your bones, but these thoroughly relaxing poses can elevate your mood, increase balance, and even encourage your body to build more bone.

Find a class that promotes this balance, and you'll be on track to a better, stronger life.