

Osteoporosis and Traditional Chinese Medicine

Osteoporosis is the progressive weakening of the bones. As bone density decreases, the risk of bone fractures increases. Our bones reach their maximum density when we are in our thirties. After that, our bone density gradually decreases as we age. Both estrogen and testosterone help regulate bone formation. Other factors that affect bone density include calcium and vitamin D intake as well as physical activity levels. Osteoporosis affects women more than men because after menopause, estrogen levels decline.

Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM, for short) has a long tradition of promoting longevity. This focus on life-long health can provide us with another perspective on osteoporosis.



Bones and "Essential Qi"

From TCM's perspective, a weakening of the bones reflects a weakening of the body's store of "Essential Qi". Essential Qi is something we are born with and build up while we are young. As we get older, we start to draw on this reserve. As we use up our stores of Essential Qi, it is less able to nourish our bodies and our bones begin to weaken as a result. With proper diet, exercise and treatment, we can slow the rate with which we use our Essential Qi or even build it back up.



Tonifying our Bones with Chinese Medicine

Modern research is showing that TCM treatments intended to tonify Essential Qi can indeed benefit bone health.

In 1994 a placebo-controlled study involving 43 post-menopausal women with osteoporosis found that a Chinese herbal prescription was able to increase ulnar and radial bone mineral content and density after five months of treatment.¹

Another placebo-controlled study looking at Qi Gong therapy (a combination of gentle exercise and meditation) found that Qi Gong practiced daily resulted in an 8.6% increase in bone density.²

Most recently, researchers at Iowa State University reported a 6% increase in bone mineral density in women who ate muffins enriched with soy flavonoids over a 24 week period compared to women given muffins that were not enriched.³



Practical Tips from East and West

In order to maintain strong bones, our bodies need the right building blocks, most notably, calcium, magnesium and vitamin D. It is important to ensure that you are getting adequate amounts of these three key vitamins and minerals.

New research is also showing the importance of dietary flavonoids and lignans. These naturally occurring compounds can be found in foods such as leafy green vegetables (especially kale, broccoli and carrot tops), beans (especially soy beans) as well as flax seeds, onions and green tea.

TCM's advice for conserving Essential Qi is also helpful. This involves including eating a wholesome diet, consisting of modest amounts of protein, replacing saturated fats with unsaturated fats and emphasizing vegetables and whole grains.

The final tip is to maintain a balance between exercise and rest, as well as work and leisure. As we get older, a shift to less strenuous exercises allows us to stay physically active without risk of injury. Walking, hiking, yoga and taiji are all examples of low-impact, weight-bearing exercises that can help keep our bones strong. Taking time to rest through meditation, prayer, Qi Gong or simply a relaxing evening stroll gives our bodies a chance to rejuvenate. This balance between activity and rest can help us stay active and fit throughout our lives.

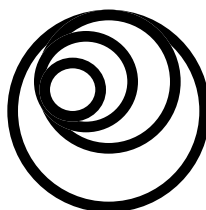
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 3. Alekel, D. Lee et al. "Isoflavone-rich soy protein isolate attenuates bone loss in the lumbar spine of perimenopausal women". Am J Clin Nutr. 2000. 72:844-52.

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Disclaimer

This factsheet is not intended to treat, diagnose or prescribe. The information provided is not to be considered a substitute for consultation with a qualified health care practitioner.

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