

BONES

Keeping your skeleton healthy is about a lot more than avoiding sticks and stones BY MELISSA DALY

WHAT THEY ARE A living, growing framework made up of soft collagen strengthened by calcium phosphate.

WHAT THEY DO Form the shape of the body, protect vital organs, and help you make your way through the world.

WHY THEY'RE IMPORTANT Weak bones up a person's risk for painful, debilitating fractures, not to mention the dreaded granny-stoop.

50%

of Americans older than 50 may be at risk for fractures from low bone mass by 2020.

—THE NATIONAL INSTITUTES OF HEALTH

ARE YOUR BONES TRYING TO TELL YOU SOMETHING?

Women are at higher risk for osteoporosis, especially as they age. "When estrogen is deficient, as in menopause, the body dissolves bone faster than it produces it," says Dr. Felicia Cosman, senior clinical director at the National Osteoporosis Foundation. Look for:

> IRREGULAR PERIODS Excessive exercise and dieting can stop menstruation. The associated estrogen drop wreaks havoc on bones.

> AGING APPEARANCE Women with deeper wrinkles in the first few years of menopause may be more likely to have low bone density, research shows. Collagen, a component of bone and skin, decreases with age, so a loss in skin firmness may indicate lower bone mass.

> HEIGHT LOSS Small spinal fractures can make a person shrink an inch or more. If you notice a change in height, ask your doctor for a bone mineral density test.

3 WAYS TO SUPPORT YOUR SCAFFOLDING

Already got milk? Here are some other bone backers.

- 1 SNACK ON FRUIT** "A diet high in fruits and vegetables is more alkaline, which seems to be better for bone health than an acidic, meat-based diet," says Cosman. Research suggests blueberries may stimulate bone formation, while prunes might slow their decay.
- 2 KEEP MOVING** We all know that weight-bearing exercise, like running or tennis, is great for our skeletons. Now, a study from McMaster University, in Hamilton, Ontario, shows that three one-hour cardio sessions a week make stem cells in bone marrow more likely to turn into bone than fat. Bonus!
- 3 THINK BEYOND DAIRY** Skim milk isn't the only route to the recommended 1,000 mg of calcium you need a day (1,200 if you're older than 50). Surprising sources: edamame (98 mg per cup), chia seeds (64 mg per tablespoon), and sesame seeds (88 mg per tablespoon).