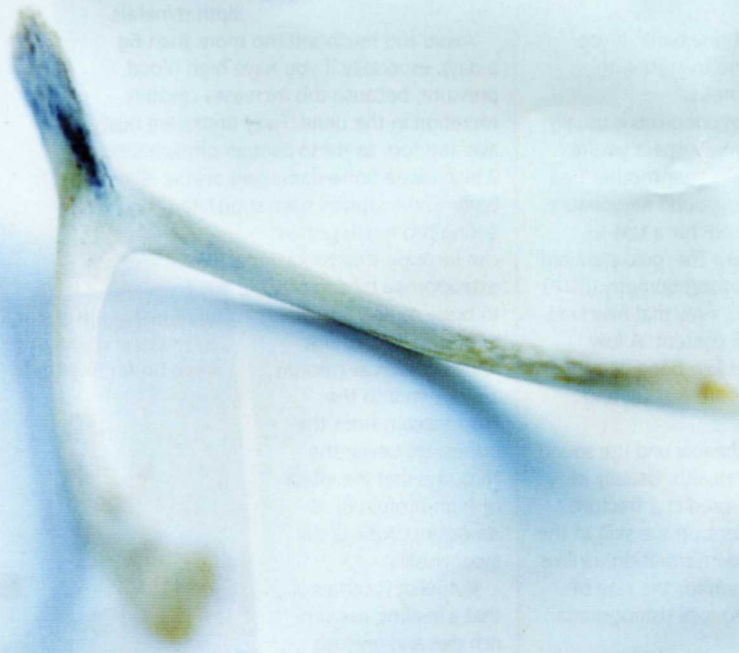


BUILD UP YOUR BONE STRENGTH

Fears about fractures and falls can be lessened by taking positive action to improve your diet and become more active

WORDS Lucy Jolin



Even if you don't have osteoporosis yourself, you probably know someone who does. It affects one in three women, especially those who have been through the menopause. Half of all women with osteoporosis will suffer a fracture due to the disease, which makes bones spongy and weak so they break more easily. But the good news is there's plenty you can do to keep your bones healthy.

Post-menopausal women are particularly vulnerable because during the menopause the ovaries stop producing oestrogen, the hormone that helps keep bones strong. In younger women of childbearing age, amenorrhoea – a lack of periods (unless you're pregnant) – also increases the risk,

as the body similarly may not be producing enough oestrogen. Others at greater risk of osteoporosis include those who take large doses of corticosteroid drugs, anyone who has a medical condition that leaves them immobile, or people who have a condition that affects the way food is absorbed, such as Crohn's disease.

There's no single cause of the condition. Genetics play a big part, but there are many lifestyle factors involved too. These include not getting enough of the right sort of weight-bearing exercise, such as walking or climbing the stairs, eating a diet low in calcium, smoking and drinking too much alcohol. If you already have osteoporosis, it's wise to cut down on your drinking, advises

the National Osteoporosis Society (NOS). They suggest you stay within 'safe' levels of no more than two to three units a day for women, with regular alcohol-free days.

GOOD BONE STRUCTURE

Bones are made up of two types of cells, the osteoclasts that break down old bone and the osteoblasts that form new bone. Until our mid-20s, bone-building osteoblasts work harder and strengthen the skeleton. But as we get older, demolition cells take over and, gradually, our bones lose strength. Alcohol is toxic to osteoblasts and raises levels of hormones that regulate calcium metabolism, causing your body to excrete more of the mineral from bones. »

