When you think about healthy aging, bone health may not be the first thing that comes to mind. However, it’s estimated that half of Americans over the age of 50 are impacted by early stage bone loss, also called osteopenia. If you are a woman Veteran living with osteopenia or osteoporosis, understanding how to treat and manage the condition is essential to living your best life.

The difference between osteopenia and osteoporosis

While osteopenia and osteoporosis sound similar, they refer to different stages of bone density loss. Osteopenia is an earlier stage of bone loss and can lead to osteoporosis, which in turn can cause bone fractures. Not all people with osteopenia need aggressive treatment. Whereas osteoporosis is more serious and requires treatment because even a minor fall could lead to a fracture.

Many people have osteopenia but go untreated and only discover an issue after they experience a fracture and have already advanced to osteoporosis. The good news is that there are many ways to lower risk of osteopenia and osteoporosis.

There are several simple steps you can take to improve your overall bone health.

Measuring Bone Density

Start by talking with your VA healthcare provider about your bone density if you are 65 or older. Bone density is the amount of bone mineral inside your bones and it impacts their strength and thickness. The higher your bone density, the stronger your bones and the lower your risk of breaking a bone or developing a condition like osteopenia or osteoporosis.

Bone density can be measured with a quick, painless bone density test called a DEXA scan. You will not need to do any special preparation, lie inside a closed tunnel, or have an injection when you receive a DEXA scan, rather a large scanning arm will simply pass slowly over your body while you lie on an open X-ray table. The scan images tell your doctor how strong your bones are, if you have osteopenia or osteoporosis, and your risk for bone breaks.
It’s not too late to get started

To maintain your bone health at any age, and even reverse some bone loss, follow these Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) tips:

- Eat a healthy and well-balanced diet that is high in calcium and vitamin D
- Exercise often, such as walking, hiking, stair climbing, and dancing
- Avoid smoking
- Limit alcohol intake
- Talk with your provider about medications that may strengthen bones

The three best types of exercise for women with osteoporosis are weight-bearing, resistance, and flexibility.

- Weight-bearing exercise is when your legs support your body weight, like walking, hiking, stair climbing, and dancing. Walking just three to five miles a week can be significant in helping to build bone health.
- Resistance exercise uses your body weight against another object, such as free weights, weight machines, water exercises, and resistance tubes or bands. These low-impact activities minimize the risk of fractures.
- Flexibility exercise keeps your muscles and joints moving freely and may include stretching and yoga.

It is important to discuss all your options with your doctor prior to starting a workout routine to help determine which activities are right for you.

VA is here for you

Protecting your health at all stages of your life is our priority. VA offers a range of health and wellness services and resources to help you maintain your bone health. Some programs and services include DEXA scans, the MOVE! Weight Management Program, Tai Chi classes, yoga instruction, and the Stay Quit Coach tobacco cessation program. Reach out to the Women Veterans Call Center at (855) 829-6626 or your local VA health center for more information.