

No bones about it: here's how to prevent osteoporosis

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Physical therapist Joanne Fagerstrom, of Erdenheim, advises pacing yourself, changing position and stretching to decompress the spine while engaging in physical activity. (Photo by Paola Nogueras)

by Constance Garcia-Barrio

From canoeing on quiet lakes to picking fragrant peaches on a farm, summer brims with inviting activities. They may burn calories, but do they build bones? It's no idle question. Thin bones, or osteoporosis, may lead to fractures, according to Switzerland's International Osteoporosis Foundation. However, some summer sports and hobbies can provide effective ways to boost bone density.

"We should keep in mind that when it comes to building bone, not all exercises are created equal," says Joanne Fagerstrom, 60, a licensed physical therapist since 1978. Fagerstrom's Super Bones classes meet weekly at the Center on the Hill, the place for active adults at the Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill. "Take swimming. It's a great aerobic exercise, but it does little to strengthen your bones because it's not a weight-bearing activity."

People who've been diagnosed with osteoporosis or osteopenia, its precursor, may shy away from exercise, notes Fagerstrom, who healed herself of osteoporosis through exercise and diet. "They're led to believe that their bones are like egg shells and that exercise endangers them, but for most people this isn't true. It's a matter of choosing activities wisely."

Walking tops Fagerstrom's list of bone builders. "It's free," says the former Mt. Airy resident. (The Fagerstroms lived in Mt. Airy from 1985 to 1993. Now they live in Erdenheim.) "Walk as briskly as possible for 30 minutes without stopping to chat or window shop. If you walk in nature, all the better. 'Forest bathing,' as the Japanese call it, has been shown to reduce blood pressure and cortisol, the fight or flight hormone. To increase the benefit of walking, consider carrying a backpack with a one pound bean bag or walking on varied surfaces, such as hills or beaches."

Approach gardening, another summer pursuit, with some caveats. "I love to play in the dirt," says Fagerstrom, "but I sit on the ground to avoid bending over. Forward bends can put an osteoporotic spine at risk for fracture. I change my position too. I get up and trim the shrubs and do a gentle back bend to extend and decompress my spine."

Fagerstrom has another tip about gardening. "Bending to pick up a big potted plant can put a load on the vertebra that can cause micro-fractures. I have to admit to myself that I can't, or shouldn't, do some things any more. I'll say to my son, 'Can you put this bag of mulch in the wheelbarrow for me?'" says Fagerstrom, who's married and has three grown sons. "Don't be too proud to ask for help."

Prevention's the name of the game, and with that in mind Fagerstrom adds a word about golf for those who are at risk for fractures. "The forceful twisting motion at the end of the swing can potentially cause a micro-fracture in the spine, and should be avoided."

Summer activities can help develop habits that serve you year round. "Remember that bag of mulch?" Fagerstrom says. "The same principle applies with grandchildren. Rather than lifting them off the floor, sit in a chair and let them climb into your lap."

"Have faith in your body's ability to heal and improve," she says. "A study of nursing home residents in their 80s and 90s who followed an exercise regimen showed that their strength increased 100 to 200%. You can strengthen your bones. It just takes a bit longer as we age."

*More information about Fagerstrom's classes in Chestnut Hill at **267-432-1795** or www.joannefagerstrom.com.*

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