



Bisphosphonates: What You Need to Know

What are bisphosphonates (bis-FOS-foe-nates)?

Bisphosphonates are the most common type of medications used to treat osteoporosis, a condition that weakens your bones and increases your chance of breaking (fracturing) a bone such as your hip.



How do they work?

Bisphosphonates work by attaching to the surface of bones and slowing down the cells (called osteoclasts) that break down bone. This allows other bone cells (called osteoblasts) to work better at building up bone. By making bones stronger, bisphosphonates do a good job of lowering your chances of fracturing your hip, wrist, or other bones.

How long do I need to take bisphosphonates?

Usually for about 3 to 6 years. After that, your doctor will take another look at your chance of having a bone fracture to decide if you should continue taking these or other osteoporosis medicines.

Do bisphosphonates have side effects?

About 1 in 4 people will have heartburn, nausea, or stomach pain when taking bisphosphonates. Some rare side effects include:

- Osteonecrosis (OS-tee-oh-ne-CROW-sis)—this is when the jaw bone breaks down, usually after dental work like tooth removal. Fewer than 1 in 10,000 people (over the next 10 years) may need surgery for osteonecrosis.
- Fracture of the thigh bone after taking bisphosphonates for several years—this happens to about 2 to 3 in 10,000 people who have used this medicine for more than 5 years. Tell your doctor if you feel pain in your groin or thigh that continues for a few weeks as these might be signs of a thigh bone fracture.

IMPORTANT TIPS

Having a fall is the most common way to break a bone. Here are some tips to reduce your chances of falling:

- Deal with falling hazards in your home. Remove throw rugs, put grab bars in bathrooms, and install good lighting in all rooms.
- Lift objects safely. Keep your back straight rather than bent. If possible, separate the object into smaller pieces before lifting.



- Get enough calcium and vitamin D every day, preferably through diet.

Calcium:

- 1,000 mg per day (men age 51–70)
- 1,200 mg per day (women over age 50, men over age 70)

Vitamin D (D2 or D3):

- 600 IU per day (age 51–70)
- 800 IU per day (over age 70)

- Do activities to improve leg strength and balance. To learn more about

how you can stay fit and avoid fracture, refer to “Too Fit to Fracture” resources from Osteoporosis Canada: <https://osteoporosis.ca/exercise-recommendations/>

