

Newson Clinic Knowledge Factsheet

Understanding DEXA scans: assessing bone health during menopause

How menopause affects bone health, plus what you need to know about DEXA scans

Newson Clinic offers state of the art DEXA bone density and DEXA body composition scans at our Stratford-upon-Avon clinic which can be useful to assess your bones, muscle and fat.

Your bones are made up of a type of connective tissue containing cells, collagen fibres, blood vessels and minerals such as calcium and phosphorus. These help the bone grow and repair itself.

Bone density relates to the amount, or thickness, of minerals in bone tissue and is a measure of how strong and healthy your bones are.

By your late 30s, your bone density starts to naturally decrease. This loss of bone density makes your bones weaker, less pliable and therefore more susceptible to breaking.

What's the link between bone density and menopause?

Women are more susceptible to a loss of bone strength in the years before, during, and after the menopause, as oestrogen (the key hormone for protecting and maintaining bone density) rapidly declines during this time. Your bone is breaking down at a faster rate than your body can grow new bone tissue.

To build and strengthen your bones plus encourage bone repair it's important to eat a healthy, well-balanced diet and exercise regularly.

This can help reduce the risk of injury to your bones, often because of a fall, and reduce the chance of a bone break if an accident does occur.

One in three women over 50 years old will sustain a fracture to the hip, for example, and this can have serious consequences to your health. Even after the initial recovery, a hip fracture can affect your ability to carry out daily activities such as eating, dressing, washing or shopping; 40% of women who fracture their hip are not able to walk again without an aid or assistance – the physical and psychological impacts can be huge. Once a fragility fracture has occurred, patients are five times more likely to experience a second fracture within the next two years¹.

What is osteoporosis?

Osteoporosis is a condition that weakens bones, making them more fragile and prone to break. It develops slowly over several years and is often only diagnosed when a fall or sudden impact causes a bone to break.

A family history of osteoporosis means you are more susceptible to bone weakening but other factors will increase your chances of developing the condition, such as smoking, heavy drinking, low body weight and certain medications².

Replacing hormones with hormone replacement therapy (HRT) helps to protect the bones from weakening due to lack of oestrogen and can reduce the risk of fragility fractures³⁻⁴. In fact, HRT is licensed as a treatment for osteoporosis in the UK, however many women with the condition are still not offered it as a treatment choice.

And while the average age of the menopause in the UK is 51, about three in 100 women will go through the menopause before the age of 40. This is known as premature ovarian insufficiency (POI). Falling oestrogen levels earlier than the average age of the menopause means younger women are at increased risk of developing osteoporosis⁵.

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What is a DEXA bone density scan?

A DEXA scan is a safe and quick scan to measure how strong your bones are. DEXA stands for dual energy X-ray absorptiometry, and this non-invasive scan uses radiation at a much lower dose than a standard X-ray to measure bone density. The DEXA uses a very low dose of radiation that is less than one tenth of the radiation from a chest X-ray and no more than every day, background radiation.

The bone density measurement is then compared against people of the same age and sex, giving a good indication as to whether you are at risk of, or have already developed, osteoporosis.

Bone density scans are often used to diagnose or assess your risk of osteoporosis. A DEXA bone scan can help guide clinicians to adjust relevant treatments to minimise further weakening and help restore the strength of your bones for the future.

Women with POI are advised to have a baseline scan at diagnosis and then at frequent intervals thereafter (usually every 3–5 years).

Having a DEXA bone scan at Newson Clinic

DEXA scans are available at our Stratford-upon-Avon clinic. The appointment lasts about 30–45 minutes, and you remain fully dressed throughout the scan.

The scan is painless and does not involve going into a 'tunnel' like an MRI scan. Instead, you will simply be asked to lie down while a scanning arm is slowly passed over your body and legs.

Patients are advised to wear comfortable, loose-fitting clothing preferably without buttons or zips and avoid wearing an underwire bra. If you have body piercings, please inform a member of staff before your scan.

What happens after my DEXA scan?

Scan results are sent to Professor David Reid, a consultant rheumatologist who has more than 30 years' experience in providing specialist osteoporosis services with a particular emphasis on bone densitometry. Prof Reid will interpret the findings of your scan and provide a detailed report to your Newson Clinic doctor (if you have one). You will also receive a copy of the report.

How much does a DEXA bone scan cost?

A DEXA bone scan costs £150, while a combined DEXA bone and body composition scan costs £250.

About DEXA body composition scans

Body composition is a term used by healthcare professionals to refer to the percentage of fat and muscle in your body. It is used to build a picture of your current health and potential future risks: two people can weigh the same but have very a different health profile because of their body composition.

The DEXA body composition scan at Newson Clinic looks at:

- Whether visceral fat (internal fat around your organs) is at a healthy level. Studies have shown people with higher amounts of visceral fat are more likely to develop type 2 diabetes, heart disease, and stroke
- How much lean mass you have. This is your overall weight minus your weight from body fat.

The body composition scan does not look at your bone density, however, having a bone density scan and a body composition would give you a measure of all three.

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The benefits of a DEXA body composition scan

If you're beginning a nutrition or fitness programme, having a DEXA body composition scan early on in your journey will enable you to monitor the changes in body fat and muscle mass in your arms, legs and trunk.

Having a DEXA body composition scan at Newson Clinic

Body composition scans are available at our Stratford-upon-Avon clinic. The scan is painless and you remain fully dressed throughout the scan.

Scan results are sent to Professor David Reid, who will interpret the findings of your scan and provide a detailed report to your Newson Clinic doctor. You'll also receive a copy of the report.

How much does a DEXA body composition scan cost?

A body composition scan costs £125, while a combined DEXA bone and body composition scan costs £250.

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References

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