

Osteoarthritis vs. Osteoporosis

By Jessica Pennington, MSPT

Although the names sound similar, osteoarthritis (OA) and osteoporosis are two diseases that vary in cause, symptoms, and treatment strategies. Even though both have the same prefix (osteo), they are very different.

Osteoarthritis occurs when the cartilage in a joint wears down and there is bone on bone contact. Cartilage is the substance that lubricates a joint and allows the bones to move over each other with more ease. Cartilage surrounds the ends of bones and is filled with water. It acts as a sponge, it is compressed with pressure and then returns to its original shape. Damage to cartilage can occur for several reasons: with age it loses its shock absorbing capabilities and breaks down, it can also be damaged by an injury, thus increasing the likelihood OA. OA occurs in individual joints and is usually not seen in the same joint on both sides of the body. Symptoms of osteoarthritis include: pain with the use of a joint which is relieved with rest, stiffness, and a grinding sound or feeling with movement of a joint. Treatment of OA begins with an exercise routine. Strengthening the muscles around the joint gives more support to the joint. Exercising in a pool decreases the impact on joint. If you are without access to a pool, using a bike or elliptical is also low impact. Joint replacement surgeries may be an option for patients who have symptoms in weight bearing joints that are not relieved with exercise.

Osteoporosis is a disorder that causes bones to become brittle and weak. The fragile bones are more likely to break, often causing a hip fracture or compression fracture of the vertebrae in the spine. Osteoporosis occurs when the body breaks down bone quicker than it is added. This occurs after age thirty, therefore it is important to strengthen and increase the density of bones in the teen years, before the breakdown occurs. A decrease in hormone level later in life also increases the rate at which bone is broken down. Unfortunately the symptoms in early osteoporosis are often silent. As the disease progresses symptoms may include back pain, decreased height, and increased incidence of fracture which occur with low force. The diagnosis of osteoporosis is done with a bone density test. The proper intake of calcium and vitamin D can help prevent osteoporosis. Weight bearing and resistance exercises increase the bone mineral density and thus decrease the risk of fracture.

The above is intended as general information only. Be sure to contact your physician for advice or your own specific medical problems.