

# If Your Bones Could Talk ...

*Here's what they'd say to you, from head to toe*

Sit up straight. Drink your milk. Go outside and play. The same advice we give to children is equally applicable to adult orthopedic health. The language may be a bit more technical, but good posture, proper nutrition and the right approach to exercise can keep bones strong, joints limber, and the entire body more healthy and pain-free.

In fact, our bones and joints would have a lot to say, if we took the time to listen. Here's what they'd want us to know to keep them in tiptop shape, head to toe.

## Jaws:

**"GET ENOUGH CALCIUM AND VITAMIN D."**

Bone strength is like a retirement plan: The earlier you start saving, the more benefits you'll have when you really need them. "Think of the concept of a 'bone bank'—one that we have to pay forward," says trauma director Laura Phieffer, M.D., a spokeswoman for the American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons.

Adults begin a gradual decline in bone strength after their mid-20s, and women get a "double hit" during menopause, Phieffer says. Regularly consuming foods or supplements that are high in calcium can slow the rate at which the mineral is leached from bones. In general, aim for at least 1,000 milligrams of calcium a day, Phieffer says. Pregnant or lactating women and those 40 and older: 1,200 to 1,300 milligrams.

And don't forget the vitamin D. Without sufficient vitamin D—up to 1,000 International Units daily—"you won't absorb the calcium," Phieffer says.

## Elbow:

**"AVOID REPETITIVE STRESS INJURY."**

"Americans tend to use bones, joints and muscles in the same direction repetitively," says Anne Reicherter, Ph.D., a member of the American Physical Therapy Association. We sit at a desk at the office, and to relax after a long day at work we ... plop down in front of a computer or TV screen.

## Build Your Bone Bank Early

By the time you hit 30, bone health is all about maintenance, which is another reason parents should pay extra attention to their children's nutritional habits through the teen years and early adulthood. After all, you won't be able to maintain something that hasn't been built to start with.

"Make sure [children and teens] are getting calcium and a healthy diet," says Laura Phieffer, M.D., spokeswoman for the American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons. "Younger women, for example, stop drinking milk and start drinking diet sodas, which is really setting them up for a potentially bad outcome and hurting themselves later."





## QUIZ

### Check Up on Your Bones

An interactive quiz from the National Institute of Arthritis and Musculoskeletal and Skin Diseases lets you plug in your diet, exercise and medical history to create a personalized information sheet about your bone health. Visit [www.niams.nih.gov](http://www.niams.nih.gov) and search "check up on your bones."

"Tennis elbow" is usually caused by repetitive overuse of the wrist muscles, which attach at the elbow, Reicherter says, which is why tennis elbow also strikes golfers, keyboard users, auto mechanics and people who engage in leisure activities such as gardening and bowling. Give those muscles a stretch by using your other hand to press your wrist all the way back, then all the way down, a few times a day, she says. Or extend your arms outward, and then turn your palms to face the ceiling.

As for the rest of the body, find hobbies or leisure activities such as dance or yoga that challenge and use muscles in different ways. At the health club, bypass the weight machines that limit direction of movement, and try free weights instead.

## Back:

### "MAINTAIN PROPER POSTURE."

"Our spine has an S-shaped curve naturally," Reicherter says. "Most of us stand pretty well, as far as our upper back is concerned. But we let our stomachs sag and slouch

## Give Your Back a Leg (and Hip) Up

When your lower back is tight and hurting, physical therapists know that other parts of the body might be responsible for the pain. With the push-pull relationship between abdominal and back muscles, it's probably easy to envision how underdeveloped abs and the resultant spinal slouch would affect the back. But what about your legs?

"Almost all of the thigh muscles are attached to the pelvis, which is interlocked with the spine," says Anne Reicherter, Ph.D., a member of the American Physical Therapy Association. If those muscles don't keep the pelvis stabilized, the spine is prone to shifting, like a house built on sand, so back muscles must work extra-hard to keep things steady. Those overworked muscles can create back pain.

The solution, in this case: Stretch and strengthen thigh and hip flexor muscles to provide a sturdy foundation from which the spine can rise.

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forward, which puts a lot of pulling strain on the lower back.” Imagine the spine as a stack of interconnected blocks, with one of the lower blocks pulled out of place. “You lose that good foundation, and it’s going to start causing you upper back pain.” Focus on keeping your abdominal muscles taut (which holds the stomach in), and keep a slight inner curve to the lower back.

A different problem occurs when we sit: Slouching turns the back into one big C curve, which puts strain on the lower spine and neck. “If we sit in a slouched position, it’s like standing and walking with the waist bent about 90 degrees forward,” Reicherter says. “If you walked around like that all day, you wouldn’t wonder why you have back pain.”

## Hips:

### “ENGAGE IN WEIGHT-BEARING EXERCISE.”

When you perform weight-bearing exercise, your body says, “I need to make my bones bigger and stronger to support that.”

“You don’t need to be bench-pressing 500 pounds,” Phieffer says. “Light resistance weights, Thera-Bands, even walking counts as weight-bearing exercise.” (Swimming, however, does not, because the water buoys your body weight.) Don’t have an hour a day? Even 20 minutes, three times a week, will have an impact.

“By doing so, we’re telling our bodies, ‘Be active, let’s maintain this bone bank, so we don’t start to lose any of it,’” Phieffer says. Stronger bones and muscles mean less stress and strain on your joints, and less chance of life-devastating injuries such as hip fractures.

## Ankles/Feet:

### “WEAR PROPER FOOTWEAR.”

Before you lace up those sneakers for a run, make sure they’re the proper kind: The wrong shoe can lead to arch pain, heel pain, shin splints and arthritic activity between the joints, according to Kirk Geter, DPM, president of the American College of Foot & Ankle Orthopedics & Medicine.

A running shoe has more cushion in the heel for shock absorption and is designed to propel you forward. A walking shoe is designed with a stiffer sole, which could overwork the muscles and cause injury or strain if worn for running, Geter says.

Feet swell throughout the day, so for the best fit, shop for shoes in the late afternoon or evening, Geter says, and describe to the salesperson the activity for which they’ll be used. **V&V**

