Bone Mineral Density Test

Why is a Bone Mineral Density Test done?
This test is a fast, safe, and painless way to find out the status of a person’s bone structure. Bone mineral density refers to the amount of bone or how tightly the bone tissue is packed. Your health care provider may recommend testing for any of these reasons:

• To see if you have osteoporosis
• To see if you are at high risk for bone fractures
• To measure any bone loss with repeated testing over time
• To see how well a treatment is working

How is the test done?
There are several types of bone density tests. All of the tests are quick, easy, and are performed outside your body and do not cause pain. The tests can measure density in the finger, wrist, forearm, knee-cap, shin bone, heel, spine, hip or total body.

The most common bone density test is called dual energy x-ray absorptimetry (DEXA). During the test you will lie back on a cushioned table under a scanner that emits low-dose x-rays. This scanner is a curving plastic arm that moves to capture images of your spine, hip, forearm or entire body.

A computer then compares your measurements with those of other people your age and young people at peak bone density. This information will tell your health care provider about your bone status and fracture risk.

Is the exam safe?
Bone mineral density tests involve a very small dose of radiation. It is like the radiation you get from one day of natural exposure in the environment. One scan gives off less than one-tenth of the radiation from a chest x-ray. In most cases, you will not need a lead apron to protect you and the technician will not leave the room.

How long will the exam take?
The bone mineral density test takes about 20 minutes and is painless.

What should I wear?
Wear comfortable clothing, loose fitting without buttons, buckles or zippers. In some cases, you may be asked to change into a gown.

Is there any special preparation for this test?
• Do not take calcium supplements for 24 hours before the exam
• Take your other medicines as you normally would
• If you are pregnant, tell the x-ray personnel before your test
• You may eat or drink before the exam

What if the bone mineral density test shows that I have osteoporosis?
If osteoporosis is found, there are treatments that can increase bone density and reduce your risk of fracture. Your health care provider will discuss your test results with you – be sure to bring up any questions and concerns you have.