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Osteoporotic Vertebral Compression Fracture

Osteoporotic vertebral compression fractures may occur due to a fall from ground level, lifting, bending, or coughing. With severe osteoporosis, fractures may occur spontaneously, without any incident. Fractures due to a fall from a height such as a ladder, falls from a bicycle, or injury in a car accident are traumatic, not osteoporotic. Traumatic fractures are due to higher energy than osteoporotic fractures and require different tests and treatments.

The following information applies to the osteoporotic type of vertebral compression fracture (VCF).

VCFs usually heal within 3 months and usually become comfortable within 2 months. Pain severity and interference with daily activity varies from one person to another. In addition, a person who heals one VCF and then breaks another vertebra may experience different levels of pain with each fracture. For severe pain and activity limitations, treatment options include kyphoplasty.

Kyphoplasty is a small surgical procedure that can be performed as an outpatient to reinforce a broken vertebra and relieve pain. It may be performed with local anesthesia and sedation as an office procedure. Most patients feel significant improvement immediately or within 2 days. After kyphoplasty, a fracture usually feels as good as a fracture that has been healing for 8 weeks or more. Patients with severe pain from a recent fracture may avoid weeks of pain by having kyphoplasty. Patients with milder pain may choose to simply let the fracture heal on its own.

Once a patient is comfortable, either due to healing of the fracture or as a result of kyphoplasty, some patients benefit from physical therapy to address residual muscle and joint pain. Physical therapy can also improve balance and reduce risk of falls and fractures. At this point it is also important to address osteoporosis with tests and treatments to strengthen bone and reduce risk of fracture. A bone density test may be useful. Supplementation with calcium and vitamin D may be suggested. A prescription medicine for osteoporosis may be necessary.

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