

Osteoporosis is a condition that many people have heard of, but few understand. I have had patients tell me that they were told that their back pain is due to osteoporosis. In fact osteoporosis is a painless condition where the bones have lost calcium. Calcium is the primary mineral in bones that helps to make bones hard, much like cement in concrete. It can be lost as a result of aging combined with reduced activity and poor nutrition.

When bones lose calcium, they become weaker. This can lead to a state where fractures can occur more easily. Any bone can fracture when weakened. The most common are the head of the femur, which is the upper leg bone, as well as spinal vertebra.

The most common type of spinal fracture is known as a compression fracture. This is where the large, weight bearing portion of a spinal bone collapses on itself. In osteoporosis cases, it can happen spontaneously or when performing actions such as bending forward, lifting and pulling. Significant pain in the back often accompanies spinal compression fractures.

In the past there were not many treatment options available for compression fractures. The pain would gradually subside as the spinal bone healed, but the result would be a shortening or a forward bending of the spine as now one of the vertebra would be somewhat flattened or wedge shaped. For a number of years now, two new treatment options have been available. One involved injecting a cement into the fractured vertebra to help stabilize the fracture. The other involved inflating a balloon in the fractured vertebra with the intent to return the vertebra to its previous size and then filling the balloon with a cement.

There had not been any studies proving the effectiveness of either of these procedures, so they have been looked upon with considerable scepticism. Now the procedure with the balloon, called kyphoplasty, has been shown to ease the initial pain of the fracture. It may also improve the function of the spine since it is restored closer to its normal shape. Long term, however, there appears to be no significant benefit over letting the condition travel its natural course.

Additional studies are underway to better clarify the value of this treatment. If you suffer from this condition, you may wish to discuss this treatment option with your doctor.

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