



by **S. Michael Tooke, MD, FRCSC**

Did you know that spinal compression fractures are more common than hip fractures in osteoporosis patients?

If you or someone you know has osteoporosis, you're probably aware that people with osteoporosis are prone to suffering hip fractures. But did you know they also have an increased risk for spinal and pelvic fractures?

These lesser-known types of fractures can be very painful and, in some cases, difficult to diagnose. The good news is: Once a spinal or pelvic fracture is properly diagnosed, drug therapies can

Osteoporosis-Related Fractures Can Cause Back and Hip Pain

be prescribed to help ease the pain while the bones heal.

What is osteoporosis?

An estimated 10 million people in the U.S. have osteoporosis, or thinning of the bones, and another 34 million have low bone density, which can lead to osteoporosis. People with osteoporosis have an increased risk for broken bones.

Contrary to popular belief, osteoporosis isn't just a woman's problem. Approximately one in two women and up to one in four men over age 50 will break a bone due to osteoporosis, according to the **National Osteoporosis Foundation**.

What bones typically break?

Many people with osteoporosis worry that they will fall and break a hip or wrist. But according to the **American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons**, they are nearly twice as likely to suffer a fracture in the spine as in the

hip or wrist. These fractures – called vertebral compression fractures – are the most common fracture in people with osteoporosis. Another less common type of fracture that is extremely painful is a pelvic insufficiency fracture.

What is a vertebral compression fracture?

This type of fracture occurs when vertebrae in your spine are compressed by osteoporosis and develop a crack due to the increased pressure. Once patients have one compression fracture, they often will develop more.

Some patients with this type of fracture experience no pain, while others have very acute symptoms. Those who come to our office usually complain of back pain near the area of the spine where the break occurred, typically in the waist area.

We usually do an MRI scan to confirm the diagnosis. X-rays do not allow us to differentiate between old and new fractures.

Common Fracture Sites

There were more than 2 million osteoporosis-related fractures in 2005, according to the National Osteoporosis Foundation:

- 547,000 vertebral fractures
- 397,000 wrist fractures
- 297,000 hip fractures
- 135,000 pelvic fractures
- 675,000 fractures at other sites

What can be done?

We treat the pain with a drug called *Calcitonin*, which is given for 4 weeks. Pain is usually less in a week or two. Even without treatment, patients generally feel better within 6-10 weeks.

What is a pelvic insufficiency fracture?

This is another type of fracture that occurs in patients with osteoporosis. The pelvic bone, which has weakened, cracks during normal everyday activities.

Patients with pelvic insufficiency fractures usually have severe buttock and hip pain that is more intense when they engage in weight-bearing activities. Every time they put their weight down, there is movement through the fracture. They feel almost like they are trying to walk on a broken hip.

Many patients that we see for this condition have been to multiple doctors who have been unable to find the cause of their extreme pain. The reason these fractures are hard to diagnose is because the break often can't be seen on an x-ray and, depending on location, may not be visible on an MRI of the spine either. We often can locate the break on a pelvic MRI.

What can be done?

We prescribe a drug called *Forteo*, which generally provides pain relief within about two weeks. Patients tell us it's like a miracle drug. The treatment protocol calls for patients to remain on *Forteo* for two years, so once we have the patients stabilized, we refer them back to a family doctor for follow-up. We must work closely with insurers to get this drug covered for patients; only those who have an osteoporosis diagnosis and are at high risk for fractures can be prescribed *Forteo*.

For more information

If you have pain that you believe may be related to osteoporosis, you may schedule a consultation at **336-333-6306** or on the Web at www.spineandscoliosisdocs.com.

S. Michael Tooke, MD, FRCSC, is a physician at Spine & Scoliosis Specialists, the Triad's only medical practice devoted exclusively to spine care. Formerly on the medical staff at the Johns Hopkins and UCLA medical schools, Dr. Tooke specializes in complex spinal disorders and has extensive experience with artificial disc replacement. He is board-certified in orthopaedic surgery.



Have a back or spine problem that's keeping you from enjoying life?

Call us today for an evaluation. As the Triad's only comprehensive, multidisciplinary center devoted exclusively to spine treatment and surgery, we offer hope – and help – to patients suffering from all types of spinal diseases and injuries.



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