

Help for pain and other symptoms caused by spinal fractures

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About this information

This information is for you if you have spinal (vertebral) fractures because of osteoporosis. It may help you understand why you have pain and how to cope with it.

You may have had a recent, painful fracture and want to know what you can do to relieve the pain.

You may be coping with long-term back pain or other symptoms caused by spinal fractures. This may be affecting how you feel about yourself, your mood, and your general wellbeing.

Whatever your experience of spinal fractures, it's understandable to want information and support to help manage any problems you are having. This booklet will explain what spinal fractures are and what they may mean for you. It will also aim to help you recover and live well.

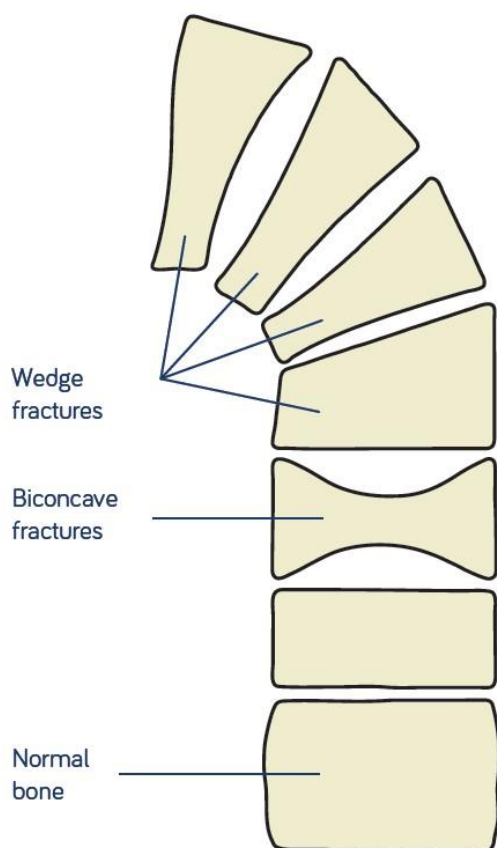
There is no easy solution that stops all pain and symptoms. But there are many things you can do to help manage the pain and keep living a fulfilling life. Having a good working partnership between you, your family, your GP, and other healthcare professionals is very important.

Each GP practice and hospital does things slightly differently. Use this booklet as a general guide about what to expect but be prepared to ask your GP or healthcare professional for more information. You can also visit our website at theros.org.uk or speak to our specialist nurses. Call free on **0808 800 0035** or email nurses@theros.org.uk

What is osteoporosis?

The word 'osteoporosis' means 'porous bone'. Osteoporosis is a condition where bones lose strength and are more likely to break. The condition mainly affects older people.

What is a spinal fracture?



The bones in your spine are called vertebrae. When these bones lose strength because of osteoporosis, they don't crack or snap, but they can squash or compress down on themselves. This is usually called a spinal fracture, a vertebral fracture or a compression fracture. Your doctor might also describe your vertebrae as crushed, wedged or collapsed.

Broken bones and fractures mean the same thing. When bones break because of osteoporosis, they are sometimes called osteoporotic fractures or fragility fractures. They break with little force or trauma.

After your vertebrae have healed, they stay in this new shape, which can cause your spine to shorten or become rounded (often called 'kyphosis'). As a result, you can get shorter and you might experience breathlessness because your lungs have less space. You might also have a protruding tummy or problems with eating or other daily activities.

However, people's experiences of spinal fractures vary. Any pain you get from osteoporosis is not because of bone thinning – instead, it's the fractures themselves that cause the pain. Some people have no pain or problems even when they have a spinal

fracture. In fact, they may not even be aware that they have a spinal fracture. Others get short-term severe pain but recover completely after a while. Some people get mild or more severe problems in the long term.

See our other booklets:

- **Getting your bones checked to keep them healthy** – information on how osteoporosis is diagnosed
- **About osteoporosis and weaker bones** – details of drug treatments you might be offered
- **Better bone health for everybody** – information on living a healthy life to support your bones

What can I expect after a spinal fracture?

A spinal fracture, like any other broken bone, takes about 6 to 12 weeks to heal. In the early stages, you may experience 'acute' (severe but temporary) pain. As your fracture heals, the pain will gradually ease.

Recovery and healing

Your spinal fracture will heal and get better without an operation. You don't need to wear a brace or corset or keep still. Spinal fractures caused by osteoporosis are called 'stable' fractures. This means that

they don't damage your spinal cord and won't cause paralysis. In fact, staying active is important to keep your muscles strong and to maintain your health generally. It will help you return to your normal life as soon as possible. If you experience severe pain, you might have to lie down for periods of time but aim to limit this if you can. Taking pain-relieving medications will help you to relax and stay mobile.

Caring for your back will help to avoid causing more pain. You **don't** need to take extra care of your back because you're concerned about causing another fracture or stopping the bone from healing.

It's natural to feel nervous that certain movements might cause another spinal fracture. However, most people can resume their normal activities and it's rare for everyday movements to cause further fractures. There are some simple adaptations you can make when moving and lifting to help protect your back and increase your confidence. Find out more from our fact sheets and films on caring for your back, especially '**Moving and lifting safely**'.

Managing your pain

It's normal to feel anxious and distressed if you are in pain after a spinal fracture. It can affect you emotionally as well as physically. It may cause low mood or tearfulness, especially if you aren't getting much sleep.

Remember that this is a temporary phase. Frustrating as it is, it will pass as you recover and get well again. Find out what works for you in the early days after a spinal fracture. It might help to sleep in a chair for a few days if that's where you are most comfortable.

The pain will gradually ease over a month or two. You may find you have good and bad days or that something will set you back for a while. Rest assured that you will feel better as time passes.

If you find that you aren't coping with your pain or it's not getting better, talk to your doctor about what help you might need. You can also contact our free Helpline and we can talk through your situation with you – see our details on page 7.

Recovering from spinal fractures can be a slow process, but you will get through it and the pain will gradually recede.

Pain is a very individual experience. Everyone responds to it differently. Pain relief that works for one person might not be effective for another. However, we can work with you to find an approach that helps and suits you.

Pain-relieving medications

You may find that you get relief from pain-relieving medications that you can buy over the counter, such as paracetamol or codeine. Your pharmacist may be able to give you some helpful advice. If your pain is more severe, you may need to ask your doctor for stronger pain-relieving drugs. If you get any side effects like constipation, your healthcare professional should be able to help. See our fact sheet, '**Pain relieving drugs after fractures**' for more information.

Surgery to help with pain

There are operations or surgical techniques called 'percutaneous vertebroplasty' and 'balloon kyphoplasty'. These may help with the pain of spinal fractures in a few specific situations. However, surgery is not suitable for most people with spinal fractures. See our fact sheet, '**Percutaneous vertebroplasty, balloon kyphoplasty and osteoporosis**' for more information.

Drug-free approaches

There are several different forms of drug-free pain relief that you can easily try at home:

- Heat packs or ice packs applied to the area of pain.
- Placing a rolled-up towel or lumbar (lower back) support cushion at the base of your spine when sitting.
- Using a TENS machine. This uses tiny pulses of electricity to block feelings of pain. You can buy one from a pharmacy or online.

There are also several techniques you can try to help you manage your pain. These include practical tools for day-to-day life such as relaxation. Pacing yourself can also help you to avoid flare-ups of pain. This means spreading out an activity and having regular small rest periods. See our fact sheet, **'Managing persistent pain after fractures'** for more information on how to cope with difficult pain.

Exercises for back pain

There are some gentle stretching exercises you can do to help relieve the pain of spinal fractures. You can begin to do these at any time after your fracture. See our fact sheet, **'Exercises for back pain after spinal fractures'**.

Complementary therapies

Approaches such as acupuncture, the Alexander technique, aromatherapy, herbal medicine, homeopathy, and reflexology may help some people to manage their pain. See our fact sheet, **'Complementary therapies for pain and symptoms after fractures'**.

Physiotherapy in the first few months after a spinal fracture

Physiotherapists can offer a combination of pain-relieving techniques, such as TENS machines, acupuncture, and hydrotherapy. They can also tailor exercises to your needs. Talk to your GP about local arrangements to get a referral. You may be able to see a physiotherapist soon after your fracture, but sometimes you will have to wait longer.

Where can I get help for long-term symptoms?

Some people experience long-term symptoms of pain or discomfort after spinal fractures because of the change in shape of the spine. The bone will have healed by then, so it isn't the actual fracture causing the pain. This doesn't mean you should have to put up with the pain without seeking help.

Why might I have long-term pain and discomfort?

It can be confusing when pain continues beyond two or three months, even though your bones and the surrounding tissues have healed. This is often called 'chronic' or 'persistent' pain.

A major cause of this pain is the permanent changes in the shape of the bones in your spine. This can result in pressure on your nerves and strain on your ligaments (the tissues that connect bones to bones). The muscles around your spine can also go into spasm as they try to adjust to the bones' new shape, which can be painful. These muscle spasms can create sudden and severe pain. You may even feel as though you've had another fracture. Sometimes you can get referred pain from your back that travels round into your chest area.

The other symptoms of spinal fractures are caused by losing height. The bones in your spine become compressed or 'collapsed'. As a result, your trunk (the part of your body between your neck and your waist) gets shorter. There is therefore less space for your internal organs, which can make you feel breathless. It can also cause problems with eating or put pressure on your bladder.

Symptoms affect everybody differently. They may be very mild, or they may make your day-to-day life difficult. However, there are positive steps you can take to help yourself live well and enjoy life.

Managing your symptoms in the long term

All the above pain management techniques can be used to help manage long-term pain. Following are some further ideas about ways to help manage long-term pain and other symptoms caused by spinal fractures. And don't forget that you can call our Helpline to get advice from our specialist nurses – see our details on page 7. They can suggest approaches that might be most suitable for you.

Exercise

After your bones have healed, you can work on specific muscle-strengthening and posture exercises. Some of these exercises aim to strengthen the muscles that surround your spine and give it more support. They won't reverse the changes in the shape of your spine, but some of your symptoms may improve. For example, you may have fewer digestive problems because of better posture. Staying active will also help to improve your pain in the long term by maintaining your overall fitness and quality of life. See our fact sheets, '**Exercises to promote bone and muscle strength**', '**Exercises to help with posture**' and '**Managing persistent pain after fractures**' for breathing and relaxation exercises.

Self-management courses

Self-management courses aim to give you the skills and knowledge to help you manage pain, fatigue, and emotional challenges. They can also help you to communicate better with your doctor and make decisions about your health. You will learn how to set personal goals and increase your self-confidence and self-esteem. Talk to your doctor about local courses. For more information visit:

painassociation.co.uk/blog/online-self-management-course

Pain clinics

Pain clinics cover a wide range of techniques – both physical and emotional – to help manage your pain. Some clinics also run pain management courses. You may not get a referral to a pain clinic in the early weeks after a fracture. However, if your pain is severe despite treatment by your GP, you may be referred to a pain clinic. This will usually be to offer help with long-term pain.

Physiotherapy for long-term symptoms of a spinal fracture

The physiotherapy techniques mentioned above are just as helpful for dealing with long-term pain as for short-term pain. Once your fracture has healed, a physiotherapist can also suggest exercises to help:

- improve your mobility and independence, and generally help you get back to normal
- improve your balance and muscle strength to reduce your risk of falling over
- improve your flexibility, breathing and posture (even if you have a severely curved spine, appropriate exercises and some activity may help to improve your pain and symptoms)
- increase your confidence and wellbeing.

They may also provide hydrotherapy, because exercise in water can be helpful.

Ask your GP about local arrangements if you feel you would benefit from seeing a physiotherapist.

Taking care with moving and lifting

Sudden awkward movements are unlikely to cause another fracture, but they can sometimes trigger muscle spasms or general pain. You may be especially sensitive in the early weeks after your fracture, so plan unusual movements or lifts carefully in advance. Move smoothly and comfortably, and lift sensibly and safely. Be guided by your own comfort when lifting and stretching. If you feel strain in your back, think about how you can adapt or change the movement. See our fact sheet, '**Moving and lifting safely**' for step-by-step suggestions.

How can I get back to my day-to-day life?

We have a range of publications specifically for people living with the long-term consequences of spinal fractures. You can use this information to help take control of your pain and symptoms.

We have information on:

- **Daily living after fractures** – useful hints and tips about washing, dressing, eating and sleeping that can make day-to-day life easier if you are living with fractures
- **Out and about after fractures** – includes information about gardening and driving after fractures
- **Financial help after fractures** – explores the financial benefits that you may be entitled to
- **Clothing, body image and osteoporosis** – helpful if you are struggling to find clothing that is both stylish and comfortable because of height loss or changes in your posture
- **Employment and osteoporosis** – covers some of the issues that may affect you if you work and are living with osteoporosis and fractures
- **Social care and support** – information on support that may be available to enable you to continue to live safely and independently in your own home after fractures
- **Caring for someone with fractures** – useful if you are caring for someone with fractures
- **Travel insurance and osteoporosis** – covers concerns you may have about travel insurance.

What does the future hold?

You may be feeling concerned about what the future holds for you. But, while you cannot ignore the fact that your risk of fractures is increased because you have osteoporosis and have already had a spinal fracture, it isn't inevitable that you will have another fracture. It's also important to remember that most people with spinal fractures return to their normal lives, continuing to do many of the activities they love.

It's important that your healthcare professional considers prescribing a drug treatment (medication) to reduce your risk of having more fractures. Discuss this with your doctor if you haven't already. You can find lots more information on drug treatment options and how to get the best out of them in our booklet, '**About osteoporosis and weaker bones**'.

There are also lifestyle changes you can make, such as eating a healthier diet and choosing forms of exercises that will encourage your bones to stay strong and help to prevent fractures. See our booklet, '**Better bone health for everybody**' to get you started.

The good news is that most people who have spinal fractures get better and return to a good quality of life. We are here to help you do that.

More ways to get support

If you have any further questions or would like to speak to one of our specialist nurses, here's how to get in touch:

- Contact the specialist nurses on our Helpline. Call **0808 800 0035** for free (Monday to Friday, 9.00am-12.30pm and 1.30-5.00pm), or email nurses@theros.org.uk
Our specialist nurses are here to give you the information and support you need through a confidential service. You don't need to have a medical problem to use the service – you are welcome to ask any question you may have.

- Find expert information to help you understand more about bone health on our website at theros.org.uk/info. You can also order free printed information by calling **01761 471771**.
- Find your local support group at theros.org.uk/support-groups or by calling **01761 471771**. We have a network of support groups across the UK, which are run by volunteers for the benefit of people affected by osteoporosis and broken bones. Our groups provide essential support and information to local communities by organising regular meetings – both online and face to face – with talks from experts and through sharing experiences about living with osteoporosis.
- Become a member today by visiting theros.org.uk/membership or call **01761 473287**. As a member, you'll receive regular communications, as well as exclusive updates and our members-only book, '**All about osteoporosis**'.

About the Royal Osteoporosis Society

The Royal Osteoporosis Society (ROS) is the only UK-wide charity dedicated to improving the prevention, diagnosis, and treatment of osteoporosis.

With more than 30 years of expertise, we are committed to helping the nation look after its bones and appreciate the importance of bone health for everybody. If you do develop osteoporosis, we're here to help you live well and to empower your healthcare professionals to provide you with the best possible care.

By driving research for the development of new treatments and therapies, we are determined to realise our vision of a future without osteoporosis.

As a charity, we rely on donations to continue our life-changing work. To find out how you can help us be there for everyone who needs us, visit theros.org.uk/how-you-can-help or call **01761 473287**.

Together, we can build a future without osteoporosis.