



Bones that Commonly Break Include the Vertebrae in the Spine

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Description

Osteoporosis is a systemic skeletal disorder characterized by low bone mass, micro-architectural deterioration of bone tissue leading to bone fragility, and consequent increase in fracture risk. It is the most common reason for a broken bone among the elderly. Until a broken bone occurs there are typically no symptoms. Bones may weaken to such a degree that a break may occur with minor stress or spontaneously. After the broken bone heals, the person may have chronic pain and a decreased ability to carry out normal activities. Osteoporosis may be due to lower-than-normal maximum bone mass and greater-than-normal bone loss. Bone loss increases after menopause due to lower levels of estrogen. Osteoporosis may also occur due to a number of diseases or treatments, including alcoholism, anorexia, hyperthyroidism, kidney disease, and surgical removal of the ovaries. Certain medications increase the rate of bone loss, including some antiseizure medications, chemotherapy, proton pump inhibitors, selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors, and glucocorticosteroids. Smoking, and too little exercise are also risk factors. Osteoporosis is defined as a bone density of 2.5 standard deviations below that of a young adult. This is typically measured by dual-energy X-ray absorptiometry. Prevention of osteoporosis includes a proper diet during childhood and efforts to avoid medications that increase the rate of bone loss. Efforts to prevent broken bones in those with osteoporosis include a good diet, exercise, and fall prevention. Lifestyle changes such as stopping smoking and not drinking alcohol may help. Bisphosphonate medications are useful to decrease future broken bones in those with previous broken bones due to osteoporosis. In those with osteoporosis but no previous broken bones, they are less effective. They do not appear to affect the risk of death.

Signs and Symptoms

Osteoporosis itself has no symptoms; its main consequence is the increased risk of bone fractures. Osteoporotic fractures occur in situations where healthy people would not normally break a bone; they are therefore regarded as fragility fractures. Typical fragility fractures occur in the vertebral column, rib, hip and wrist.

Fractures

Fractures are a common symptom of osteoporosis and can result in disability. Acute and chronic pain in the elderly is often attributed to fractures from osteoporosis and can lead to further disability and early mortality. These fractures may also be asymptomatic. The most common osteoporotic fractures are of the wrist, spine, shoulder and hip. The symptoms of a vertebral collapse ("compression fracture") are sudden back pain, often with radicular pain (shooting pain due to nerve root compression) and rarely with spinal cord compression or cauda equina syndrome. Multiple vertebral fractures lead to a stooped posture, loss of height, and chronic pain with resultant reduction in mobility.

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