Does Osteoporosis Cause Pain?

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Understanding Osteoporosis Pain

When you think about osteoporosis, do you think about pain? Maybe not – after all, many other chronic conditions are associated with pain – fibromyalgia, migraines, and arthritis, for example.

However, as with other chronic conditions, osteoporosis can and does cause pain. And it can be difficult to treat that pain. Here's a quick discussion on why osteoporosis causes pain, and what you can do about it.

Does Osteoporosis Cause Pain?

You've probably heard the term "silent disease" before, correct? Often, we describe osteoporosis as a silent disease because it may not cause any symptoms whatsoever – until a fracture occurs. And by some estimates, the US has approximately 1.5 million fractures annually related to osteoporosis.

In fact, the most common cause of osteoporotic pain is a **spinal compression fracture**. When a compression fracture occurs, the discs that are between the vertebrae that provide cushioning become compressed. Subsequently, this causes pain and potential problems with ambulation.

Microtrabecular fractures can also occur; these are essentially tiny cracks on the surface of the bone. You know how you've shrunk an inch or two as you've aged? You have microtrabecular fractures to thank for this loss in height – and possibly for the nagging, achy back pain.

Although you may have associated **stress fractures** with sports injuries, osteoporosis can be a potential cause of a stress fracture. When bones are weak, normal day-to-day activities can cause a stress fracture. Or, a simple slip that would not typically cause a facture can cause a fracture – and the most worrisome is the hip fracture.

What Can be Done for Osteoporosis Pain?

The treatment for osteoporotic pain is often a multifaceted approach. This is because using one treatment modality is not enough to treat the pain, but using a multi-pronged approach is much more effective.

What Is Good for Osteoporosis Pain?

- **Medications** are typically used to treat osteoporotic pain. Most often over-the-counter pain medications are recommended, such as acetaminophen or ibuprofen. Occasionally, prescription pain medications are prescribed, but these are only used on a short-term basis, and for long-term pain, an alternate plan needs to be figured out – such as antidepressants. Antidepressants are often beneficial for the treatment of chronic pain.
- **Physical therapy** can help increase activity if you have been inactive due to pain. Although it may be hard to begin physical activity due to pain, often you'll feel better after several sessions. Physical therapists are

well-trained in working with patients with chronic pain.

- **Braces** and **supports** can be prescribed after sustaining a fracture. These devices can help you maintain your normal movement during the healing process. The downfall – if you wear them too long, they can weaken your muscles, which can eventually weaken your muscles. You must work on strengthening your muscles if you wear a brace.
- **Mind-body therapies** may also be helpful in reducing pain. Examples include talk therapy, relaxation training, biofeedback, and guided imagery. All allow you to focus on something other than your pain, which ideally reduces the level of your pain.
- **Surgery** may be indicated if these therapies do not work. For compression fractures, the two types of operations that are indicated include vertebroplasty and kyphoplasty. Both types of surgeries work best if they are performed within eight weeks of sustaining the fracture.

Can Osteoporosis Pain be Prevented?

This is a classic “yes and no” question.

According to John Kelly, MD, an associate professor of orthopedic surgery at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia, osteoporosis is a disease that begins in childhood.

Why? Because the time to prevent it before the age of 30 – at that point, a healthy diet and an exercise routine will have the best chance of building healthy bones.

But what if you do not prevent osteoporosis at a young age?

According to the National Osteoporosis Foundation, “You’re never too young or too old to improve the health of your bones. Osteoporosis prevention should begin in childhood. But it shouldn’t stop there. Whatever your age, the habits you adopt now can affect your bone health for the rest of your life.”

Here’s what you can do to improve bone health, at *any age!*

- Eat a well-balanced diet that includes plenty of calcium and vitamin D.
- If you’re not already, begin a regular exercise routine. Consult your physician, who can refer you to a professional, if you need help with this.
- If you have not already, quit smoking.
- Limit alcohol intake to no more than 2-3 drinks per day.