How Can Osteoporosis Cause Pain, and What Can You Do About It?

by KARLA JARVIS

Is Osteoporosis Painful?

People may wonder, is osteoporosis painful? Well, like many health conditions, the effects of osteoporosis can be painful, both physically and emotionally. Whether it is chronic or acute, pain can limit anyone's enjoyment of life. It's useful to understand that osteoporosis itself is not painful, so it is a disease that many may be unaware that they even have. While a single cause for osteoporosis remains unknown, women and men who are over the age of 50 should be assessed by their health care professionals to determine if they are at risk.

At 54, I have many of the risk factors for osteoporosis, so I pursued my own assessment. Learning that I have osteopenia, the precursor to osteoporosis, spurred me to improve my lifestyle in an effort to minimize my own risk. I am grateful that I have not had any fractures, nor do I experience any osteoporotic pain. While there is no cure for osteoporosis, there are many effective treatments, as well as many strategies to manage the pain associated with this challenging condition.

What Is Osteoporosis?

Osteoporosis is a bone disease that causes bone loss, so treatment is primarily aimed at slowing or preventing bone loss. If bone loss occurs, there is an increased risk of a fragility fracture, even from a minor fall or another injury. These fractures can have devastating consequences such as ongoing pain, disability and even death. Unfortunately, osteoporosis can occur without noticeable symptoms. There are many people who are not diagnosed with osteoporosis until they suffer a painful fracture, typically from a minor fall.

How Does Osteoporosis Cause Pain?

The pain associated with osteoporosis can come from different sources. Many individuals, like me, do not experience any pain at all. If you suffer a fracture, there can be significant and acute pain which normally resolves itself, as the fracture heals over weeks. For some, osteoporosis may cause spinal compression fractures, which may result in chronic pain in the back and torso. In extreme cases, this spinal compression can lead to the spine curving forward, resulting in the ribs sitting on the pelvic bone. Pain from this can be challenging to manage effectively, and this severe damage may require surgery.

In an effort to protect our joints and bones, muscles may constantly spasm and tense, and this can in turn into pinched nerves, which causes pain. For many, tiny microscopic fractures can be very painful. There are a few areas of the body that are more often associated with fractures due to osteoporosis: the hips, spine and wrists. Improving your balance and strengthening core muscles can go a long way in preventing a fall. Fractures due to osteoporosis can be life-limiting, and the pain can be difficult to endure, but there are strategies that may help.

Options for Pain Management

Talk to Your Doctor

There are many positive steps you can take to live better, even with a diagnosis of osteoporosis. First, discuss your best options with your health care team, as they have a complete picture of your overall health and so they can make the most appropriate lifestyle, medication and treatment recommendations for you. A lifestyle that includes regular exercise, balanced and healthy nutrition, and a solid emotional support system are a must, not just for osteoporosis but for anyone wanting to live their best life. Consider joining an osteoporosis support group; discussing your concerns and experiences with others may provide insight and reduce the painful feeling of being alone.

Diet and Supplements

Your health care team may recommend dietary plans or supplements to ensure you are getting the recommended amounts of Vitamin D, calcium and protein. A healthy diet is one key to ensuring that bone loss can be minimized. Be defensive and avoid the pain that goes along with a fracture by reinforcing your bones. By focusing on the right diet, and by using dietary supplements, you can better manage your osteoporosis by increasing and maintaining your bone health. Consider consulting a dietary expert such as a registered dietitian or a nutritionist to work with you in developing a nutritious, delicious meal plan to ensure you are eating everything you need to keep your bones as healthy as possible.

Meditation

Many people find that learning relaxation techniques or meditation helps them to manage their pain by focusing their mind and by bringing their attention to their breathing. Guided imagery involves focusing on positive images or words may help to take your mind off the pain. You may find benefits from discussing your pain, health and other concerns with a therapist. Therapists will hear your concerns and help you to develop strategies to better manage your stress and pain.

Massage Therapy

Others with osteoporosis find benefits from a gentle massage, light stretching and strengthening exercises. While it may be painful or difficult to move, you may feel even worse if you become sedentary. Being sedentary may also lead to other health concerns.

Other Therapeutic Options

Other treatment options available to you include acupuncture, TENS (transcutaneous electrical nerve stimulation) and ultrasound. TENS acts by sending a mild electric current through your body and nerve fibers.

Pain Medication

Your doctor may also suggest pain medication. Medication is the most common method of managing osteoporosis pain and includes both prescription drugs, such as opioids, and over the counter drugs, such as Tylenol and acetaminophen. Discuss which medications, if any, may be right for you with your health care team.

Your Next Steps…

Pain management can be a challenging path, but with the right personal support and guidance from your health care team, you are sure to find a treatment option that works for you. Managing your pain may be best accomplished by using some or all of these methods in concert. You can reduce the risks associated with the development or worsening of osteoporosis and the chance of experiencing a fracture. Knowing that you have osteoporosis can be frightening, and you may feel anxious or alone. However, with the proper treatments and supports, you can live a full, rewarding and active life, even with osteoporosis. The key is to embrace the many treatment options available to you following your diagnosis; take charge of your health and well being.