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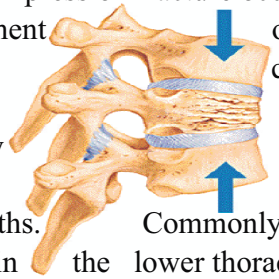
WHAT IS A COMPRESSION FRACTURE?

A vertebral compression fracture occurs when a vertebral segment of the spinal column gets compressed, fractures and collapses. It is extremely painful; the pain can endure for weeks to months. Commonly affected segments are in the lower thoracic and upper lumbar spine.



CAUSES: It can happen secondary to trauma such as a fall or it can happen spontaneously. Elderly females are especially prone to spontaneous fracture due to bone decalcification called osteoporosis (brittle bones). Osteoporosis commonly occurs in women who have gone through menopause due to the lack estrogen. It can also happen in men treated with long term steroids such as asthmatics patients . In patients with osteoporosis, minor stresses can cause a compression fracture. Spontaneous fractures can also happen with cancer especially with metastatic breast, prostate or lung cancer. Localized bone infection or osteomyelitis can also sometimes cause compression fracture in diabetics or IV drug users.

WHAT YOU FEEL & WHAT THE DOCTOR LOOKS FOR:

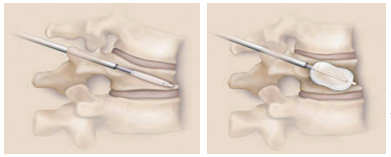
Any patient older than 50 who develops sudden onset of localized lower back pain should be suspected of suffering from acompression fracture. Most patients usually remember exactly what they were doing when the pain started. However others will not associate the pain to any particular activity. Any spine movement, deep respiration and coughing tends to make the pain worse. When the compression is severe, a nerve may get pinched, and tingling, numbness or sciatica of either lower extremity may accompany the pain. Bed rest usually alleviates the pain. Compression fractures have a substantial negative impact on the patient's function and quality of life. In addition to physical limitations, compression fractures may have a psychosocial and emotional impact on the elderly person who already faces losses of independent function. Palpation of the affected vertebra may produce pain and also paraspinous muscle spasm. Nausea, vomiting and splinting of respiratory muscles may be present as well. Splinting may lead to hypo-ventilation, atelectasis and ultimately pneumonia. Compression fractures can also be insidious and may produce only modest back pain. Over time, multiple fractures may result in loss of height and a hunchback posture which may result in pain from muscle fatigue.

TESTING: After a history and physical exam is performed, one or more of the following may be ordered depending on symptoms and circumstances; plain x-rays, MRI or CT-scan, radioactive bone scanning, bone density testing, testing for parathyroid dysfunction, CBC (complete blood count), sedimentation rate, PSA (prostate specific antigen)

TREATMENT:

Self-care at home. Rest, pain relievers and ice, (not heat) applied to the area, may at times be sufficient. When allowed by the doctor, a home stretching and strengthening program may be of help.

Medical Treatment. We must first determine if the fracture is stable or unstable. Normally they are stable and physiologic forces or movements will not displace the fragments. Depending on the severity of signs and symptoms, initially short periods of bed rest for 3 or 4 days with oral analgesics, stool softeners, prophylactic laxatives, Miacalcin nasal spray, and muscle relaxants may suffice. Especially important are external back braces or corsets to immobilize the fracture by immobilizing the trunk. This alone may provide great relieve. If splinting of respiratory muscles is present or if symptoms are severe, epidural steroid injections may be indicated, before pulmonary complications such as atelectasis and pneumonia occur. If still in pain, a percutaneus Kyphoplasty may be needed. As shown an acrylic cement is



injected into a balloon placed thru a cannula in the fractured vertebral body. Physical therapy may also help relieve the pain, recondition surrounding muscles and increase function.

Surgical therapy. It is seldom indicated and carries a greater risk. If symptoms of spinal cord or nerve compression exist, surgical decompression and fusion may be needed.