Living with Osteoporosis

Coping after broken bones
Is osteoporosis painful?

In the United Kingdom, one in two women and one in five men over the age of 50 will break a bone because of osteoporosis. Osteoporosis literally means 'porous bones' where bones lose their density.

This in itself is not painful, but it causes the bones to become more fragile and prone to break. These broken bones most commonly occur in the hip, wrist and spine and it is generally spinal fractures that can cause the chronic pain associated with osteoporosis.

Strong, dense bone

Fragile, osteoporotic bone

Everyone's experiences of spinal fractures are different. Some people experience no pain at all whereas others may have pain even after the fracture has healed.

Spinal fractures can lead to other complications such as curvature of the spine, height loss, shortness of breath, inability to eat large meals and/or pressure on the bladder or bowel.

Take back control!

There are no magic pills that will stop all pain but a good working partnership between you, your family and your GP is a helpful starting point on the road to a happier, more pain-free life. Here is a range of options to try out to find the right one for you:

- Pain-killing drugs - used properly pain can be managed by over the counter painkillers, such as paracetamol or ibuprofen. If these are not working you may need prescription painkillers, so talk to your doctor. What's important is to take them regularly as prescribed. This helps to keep on top of pain and prevents it escalating out of control.

- Drug free methods - such as TENS machines which use tiny pulses of electricity to block feelings of pain, or heat or ice packs which can help to reduce muscle spasms and are easily used at home.

- Additional NHS services - talk to your doctor about the possibility of hydrotherapy, physiotherapy or the possibility of a referral to a pain management clinic.

- Self management courses - several organisations run courses, often led by those with long-term medical conditions, to help people find ways to manage their condition. Examples include the Long Term Medical Conditions Alliance and the Expert Patients Programme.

- Exercises to build up muscle strength to support the spine can be helpful. The NOS has booklets on exercise that may help.

- Complementary therapies - acupuncture, the Alexander Technique, aromatherapy, herbal medicine, homeopathy, reflexology and relaxation techniques may help some to manage their pain.

- Anti-depressants - do not be alarmed by these types of drugs because in low doses they can help to control associated nerve pain.

- Calcitonin - given in the first two weeks of a spinal fracture it can help to reduce pain, although this drug will generally only be prescribed by a specialist.

- Surgery - there are surgical techniques called percutaneous vertebroplasty and balloon kyphoplasty which may help with the pain of spinal fractures. However, these are not widely available in the UK.
Types of pain

Acute
This happens immediately a bone breaks and will usually lessen over several weeks as injured tissue and bone heals. Your doctor may prescribe painkillers which you should take as directed. Spinal fractures may cause pain with the slightest movement so gentle controlled moves can help. You may want to rest in bed or a comfortable chair but try not to do this for long periods unless told to do so by your doctor. Remaining immobile can create its own set of problems, such as blood clots, pressure sores, chest infections and you may lose bone density.

Chronic
This is pain that lasts beyond the expected healing time, sometimes defined as longer than three months, and remains even though the bone and surrounding tissue has healed. It is possible the pain is now due to a change in posture and the extra strain this puts on muscles and ligaments. This can become a vicious circle as the strain creates muscle tension which increases the duration and intensity of pain. This creates a fear of future pain which leads to more muscle tension, followed by a hunched position as you try to reduce the pain. Long-term pain can make you irritable and sometimes irrational, affecting relationships with those closest to you.

National Osteoporosis Society

If you want to know more about how to cope with spinal fractures contact the National Osteoporosis Society. It has a range of interesting and informative booklets on all aspects of the disease, including one called Living with Osteoporosis – coping after broken bones which also contains tips from our members to help you tackle a wide range of everyday issues.

Call the NOS on 01761 471771 or visit our website at www.nos.org.uk or write to us at National Osteoporosis Society, Camerton, Bath BA2 0PJ.

The NOS also has a helpline staffed by nurses who can offer information on all aspects of osteoporosis. Call 0845 450 0230 Monday to Friday between 10am and 3pm.