

Vertebral Compression Fractures

Condition: Vertebral compression fractures (VCFs) are fractures in the spine that occur because of force often associated with trauma. This injury can lead to back pain and cause a person to lose height. They are also known as spinal compression fractures.

Background: Many VCFs are due to underlying osteoporosis and happen to older people. For people with moderate osteoporosis, even tripping or trying to lift an object can result in a fracture. For those with advanced osteoporosis, even smaller motions such as coughing can fracture the spine. VCFs can also be caused by traumatic injuries such as falls.

Risk Factors: Post-menopausal women with osteoporosis are at greatest risk. Examples of other groups at risk include people with cancer and smokers.

History and Symptoms: The primary symptom is back pain when standing, walking or bending, although some people do not experience pain. Pain can come on quickly, or progress gradually and be minor or severe. A telltale sign of VCF is a curved or “hunchback” spine and loss of height.

Physical Exam: During the exam, the physician will check for spine pain or abnormality as well as loss of sensation, weakness and abnormal reflexes, which could indicate a more severe VCF.

Diagnostic Process: Imaging tests such as X-rays, CT or MRI are typically ordered to help detect a VCF and better understand any abnormalities in the spine.

Rehab Management: It is recommended for a VCF the patient be seen by a physical medicine and rehabilitation (PM&R) physician for treatment due to their expertise in spine injuries. They may prescribe braces to control pain, and restore posture. In most cases, VCFs can heal on their own. Pain medications are often used to control symptoms during healing. Underlying osteoporosis may require medication to control bone loss. Physical therapy may also be prescribed to improve function. In more severe cases, spine procedures or surgery may be considered.

Other Resources for Patients and Families: VCFs shift a person’s center of gravity, which means they are more likely to fall. The CDC’s [Stopping Elderly Deaths and Injuries \(STEADI\) program](#) offers fall-prevention resources. [NIH Osteoporosis and Related Bone Diseases ~ National Resource Center](#) also has resources that can help.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is PM&R?

Physical medicine and rehabilitation (PM&R), also known as physiatry, is a primary medical specialty that aims to enhance and restore functional ability and improve quality of life to those with injuries, physical impairments or disabilities affecting the brain, spinal cord, nerves, bones, joints, ligaments, muscles and tendons. PM&R physicians, known as physiatrists, evaluate and treat the whole body, maximize patients' independence in their daily life and are experts in designing comprehensive, patient-centered treatment plans to empower patients to achieve their goals. By taking the whole body into account, they can accurately pin-point problems, decrease pain, assist in recovery from devastating injuries and maximize overall outcomes and performance with non-surgical and peri-surgical options. To learn more, visit www.aapmr.org/aboutpmr.

What makes PM&R physicians unique?

PM&R physicians' training focuses not just on treating medical conditions, but on enhancing the patient's performance and quality of life in the context of those medical conditions. They focus not only on one part of the body, but instead on the development of a comprehensive program for putting the pieces of a person's life back together – medically, socially, emotionally and vocationally – after injury or disease. PM&R physicians make and manage medical diagnoses, design a treatment plan and prescribe the therapies that physical therapists or other allied therapists perform or that are carried out by the patients themselves. By providing an appropriate treatment plan, PM&R physicians help patients stay as active as possible at any age. Their broad medical expertise allows them to treat disabling conditions throughout a person's lifetime.

Why see a PM&R physician?

A PM&R physician will thoroughly assess your condition, needs, and expectations and rule out any serious medical illnesses to develop a treatment plan. By understanding your condition and goals, you and your PM&R physician can develop a treatment plan suited to your unique needs.

How do I find a PM&R physician near me?

Visit www.aapmr.org/findapmrphysician or contact your primary care physician for a referral.