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Original Article

Clinical Management of Vertebral Compression Fractures

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Abstract

Vertebral compression fractures (VCF's) are the most common form of osteoporotic fractures. Whether symptomatic or asymptomatic, they both represent a high risk for not only vertebral but also nonvertebral fractures in untreated populations. This high risk of future fracture after a VCF is independent of the T-score because bone strength is a combination of bone mineral density and bone quality. VCFs are the single greatest risk for future fractures at all other skeletal sites in untreated populations, including hip fractures. They are often unrecognized despite their exceptionally high prevalence in all genders and most ethnic groups as age increases. This article highlights some of the key messages about VCF's, and how assessment for their presence and then management will reduce the risk of all osteoporotic fractures.

Key Words: Vertebral fractures.

Introduction

Vertebral compression fractures (VCFs) are the most common fragility fractures in all forms of osteoporosis, including postmenopausal, male, and glucocorticoid-induced osteoporosis (1–3). The presence of a fragility vertebral fracture has several clinical and management implications.

Clinical Implications

Either symptomatic (painful) or asymptomatic (radiographically defined) VCFs have clinical implications if unrecognized and untreated. Either type of fractures reduces pulmonary vital capacity, leads to a greater risk of other fragility fractures at both vertebral bodies and other skeletal sites (hip, forearm, pelvis). It is as if vertebral fractures are conveying a signal of systemic skeletal fragility. Patients with either clinical (painful) or morphometric (X-ray diagnosed) have a greater risk for falling.

Management Implications

1. A VCF makes the diagnosis of osteoporosis independent of the bone mineral density (BMD) level or “T-score” (4–9).

2. A VCF requires a work-up for secondary causes of osteoporosis (10).
3. A VCF fulfills virtually all international clinical guidelines for pharmacological treatment in addition to adequate calcium, vitamin D, and fall prevention strategies (11–14).


The reality is that most VCF are missed by clinicians. The reasons behind this under diagnosis and under treatment of VCF include the following:


1. A lack of awareness that most VCFs are asymptomatic. Clinicians are looking for pain as the clue to the possible presence of a VCF (15–20).
2. The underappreciation that even morphometric (radiologically detected) VCFs convey a high risk, for not only more VCFs but also other fractures at other skeletal sites (19–26).
3. That VCFs exist although the T-score is normal (4,5).
4. That simple height measurements are often not even done in physician offices; or rather, if done, are often done on inaccurate scales (e.g., the “metal rod”) rather than the wall mounted and inexpensive stadiometer.
5. Height loss should be the alerting signal that a VCF may be present. The International Society for Clinical Densitometry has established specific prevalent or interval height loss values that have a high probability of detecting either a prevalent or incident VCF (International Society for Clinical Densitometry PDC 2013).

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109  6. The underreporting of the presence of VCF by radiologists examining routine PA and lateral chest X-rays.

110  The “care gap”: a gap exists between measurements of a patient’s height, the recognition that a specific amount of height loss should trigger a vertebral radiograph or vertebral fracture assessment and the communication between the office staff concerning the result of the height measurement and the order for the radiological examination of the vertebrae. In part, this “gap” is regulated by reimbursement or legal systems that may not allow a non-licensed medical provider the ability to order an imaging examination.

120 This article provides some insights into pragmatic ways this author, who sees daily a large volume of referred patients potentially having osteoporosis and other metabolic bone diseases, tries to address these challenging issues of identification and management of VCF.

127 Symptomatic VCF

128 Patients who experience the acute onset of mid back pain, or, at times, referred pain to the sternal area are often first seen in the emergency department because they go there of their own motivation or are sent there by their managing physician. It is probably the right process as more immediate life-threatening conditions such as a myocardial infarction, dissecting aortic aneurysm, pulmonary embolus, or even esophageal rupture can often present with the same symptomatology.

137 Once the differential diagnosis includes a VCF, the “dating” of that VCF is important, and this can best be done by a good history with regard to the acuteness of the symptoms and magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) of that anatomical area. The MRI estimation of the duration of the event, is often implied by the degree of edema surrounding the MRI lesion, and this acute MRI pattern usually persists for several months after the fracture (27,28). As important as the dating of the VCF is, the ability of MRI to exclude a pathological fracture, one especially due to metastatic cancer or multiple myeloma is equally important. MRIs of the vertebral fracture is specific for a pathological fracture; and, although an MRI might suggest Paget’s disease, Paget’s disease of bone is a very specific X-ray diagnosis.

150 Once the diagnosis of an acute osteoporotic VCF is made, then management focuses on 2 areas:

- 152 1. Pain management
- 153 2. Management of the skeletal fragility

155 “Pain management” includes an array of choices in which the physician should use multifactorial approaches: analgesic anti-inflammatory medications; ice packs; rest; and, in time, specific physical therapy (29–32). The severity and duration of the pain from an acute VCF has a wide range of clinical manifestations. The most recalcitrant ones can become life threatening because the patients are often elderly, and their nutrition may become jeopardized quickly. Weight loss and loss of muscle mass (sarcopenia) can occur surprisingly fast

163 if they remain immobilized and have concomitant loss of 164 appetite. When medical management is ineffective, then 165 consideration of vertebroplasty or kyphoplasty is important 166 because both may have an acute analgesic effect and allow 167 for patient recovery (33–35). How long to wait before medical 168 management is considered unsuccessful, and perform 169 either vertebroplasty or kyphoplasty is a clinical judgment. 170 It seems that vertebroplasty or kyphoplasty may be less effective 171 once one has delayed their performance beyond 3–4 mo. 172 In my experience, in the frail elderly, it becomes clear that 173 medical management is unsuccessful within a week or 2 of 174 the acute fracture.

175 Skeletal fragility: equally important is the initiation of 176 pharmacological therapy to increase bone strength to mitigate 177 further VCF in the immediate time period (i.e., the “cascade” 178 phenomenon) but also to treat the systemic disease of osteoporosis. Not only is the risk of a 2nd VCF very high within 179 the first 12 mo after an acute VCF, but also is the risk of 180 all clinical fractures as well. After the secondary work-up 181 for other causes of osteoporosis has ruled out causes other 182 than estrogen deficiency (e.g., postmenopausal osteoporosis), 183 then the physician has a menu of effective and registered 184 therapies used for the purpose of increasing bone strength 185 and decreasing the risk for subsequent fractures. All the registered 186 treatment for postmenopausal osteoporosis gained registration 187 based on proven efficacy to reduce vertebral fractures 188 as compared with placebo (36–43). Hence, the oral and intravenous 189 bisphosphonates, denosumab, and teriparatide are 190 choices that the clinician can make in a shared decision-making 191 process with these very sick patients.

192 There are 2 pharmacological agents that have some evidence 193 for an analgesic effect—calcitonin and teriparatide.

194 The most suggestive acute analgesic effect comes from the 195 injectable calcitonin data, the parenteral formulation [Calci- 196 mar; (44)]. Most of the analgesic efficacy of calcitonin comes 197 from small studies with little control data. The analgesic 198 effect seems to be dose related. Although the registered 199 parenteral (subcutaneous) dose is 0.5 cc subcutaneous daily, 200 the higher the dose (even 4 times a day) may have a greater 201 analgesic effect. However, the higher the dose of calcitonin, 202 the greater the side effects, especially nausea and vomiting. 203 In addition, from the registration trials of calcitonin, especially 204 the nasal formulation (Miacalcin), the fracture efficacy 205 was only observed for vertebral fractures, and no analgesic 206 effect was observed (45). In Europe, calcitonin has been 207 withdrawn from availability due to the concern about post- 208 marketing reports of certain gastrointestinal cancers (46).

209 Teriparatide (Forteo), the only currently available anabolic 210 agent registered for osteoporosis management, also has data 211 from clinical trials suggesting a reduction of pain in patients 212 with VCF (47). Because teriparatide is indicated for high-risk 213 patients and patients with acute VCF are clearly at high risk, 214 teriparatide becomes a strong first-line consideration. Because 215 many health-care systems will only approve teriparatide in 216 patients who have “failed” less expensive first-line therapies, 217 the first-line use of teriparatide may be problematic in some 218 health-care systems.

Asymptomatic Vertebral Compression Fractures

Morphometric VCFs are often asymptomatic yet have substantial prognostic implications (11–14,21–26). Although neither the patient nor the physician may be able to date the VCF, they are associated with a high risk for all clinical fractures in the untreated patient; and, are associated with a greater risk for falls and reduction in lung function (vital capacity). Thus, they are serious.

The clinical management starts with identification and then conveying to the asymptomatic patient, whose “T-score” may be normal, that they have osteoporosis and need a work-up for secondary etiologies and treatment. These latter steps are often not without challenges because both patients and referring busy primary care physicians often have little information why these “silent” compressed vertebrae represent a “fracture” in the parlance of metabolic bone experts, or why they represent severe osteoporosis. Payers in this era of restricted reimbursement may deny payment for treatments if their clients’ T-scores are not -2.5 or lower as they too are ill informed about the epidemiology implying the importance of morphometric VCF. A fracture is 1 element of bone strength with the other element of bone strength being bone quality, which until the recent introduction of trabecular bone score was not measurable in clinical practice. There are a number of clinical situations that often have normal T-scores and yet also have VCF where the bone strength is impaired by poor bone quality, especially diabetes mellitus, chronic kidney disease, and the syndrome of lower extremity fractures in healthy premenopausal women. Once trust is created, then the dialogue between patient and physician enters into discussions concerning differential diagnosis and management.

In addition to often overlooked basic interventions, for example, adequate calcium, vitamin D, and fall reduction programs, pharmacological therapy is indicated in these high-risk patients, as in all the registration clinical trials that led to the approval of treatments for postmenopausal osteoporosis, a greater reduction in incident VCF was seen in the treated as opposed to the placebo group, the latter given adequate calcium and vitamin D (38–43).

Both the bisphosphonates (oral and intravenous), the human monoclonal antibody to soluble RANK-Ligand (denosumab) and the anabolic agent, teriparatide, have strong evidence for reduction in incident VCF. Once treatment with one of these agents is begun, then the important issue of defining a therapeutic effect becomes paramount. In addition to encouraging compliance, monitoring also includes serial BMD determinations (to be certain, the BMD does not go down); measurement of bone turnover markers (C-telopeptide in the case of antiresorptive agents and propeptide type I collagen for anabolic agents) to be sure, they change in the expected direction; and changes in height (48–51). Height should remain stable over time. An additional reduction in height of $3/4$ " or more justifies a repeat spine radiograph or vertebral fracture assessment to assess whether a new VCF has developed or a preexisting VCF has become worse (52).

No drug abolishes risk, but new VCF on therapy should be followed by a reevaluation for previously undiscovered secondary causes of fragility and consideration of changing treatment to therapies with a different mechanism of action.

In conclusions, VCFs, both symptomatic and asymptomatic, acute and chronic, are symbolic of severe systemic skeletal fragility. Most asymptomatic VCFs are not diagnosed because the connection between height loss and the potential for a VCF is underappreciated. Even if seen, the connection between the finding of a “silent” VCF and severe osteoporosis is often not made; hence, therapy is not initiated. In the field of osteoporosis, the proportion of people in certain health plans who receive a pharmacological agent for osteoporosis after a hip fracture has declined since 2001. If such a disconcerting discovery is seen even after a very major symptomatic fracture (hip), one can only surmise that the proportion of patients with asymptomatic VCF not treated is even greater. Kanis et al (53) recently published an editorial on how the osteoporosis community has failed in its mission to reduce the burden of osteoporotic fractures. It is time that, as an international community, we reverse this perspective so those patients with VCF, both clinical (painful) and morphometric (asymptomatic), receive proper management.

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