

# Vertebral compression fracture

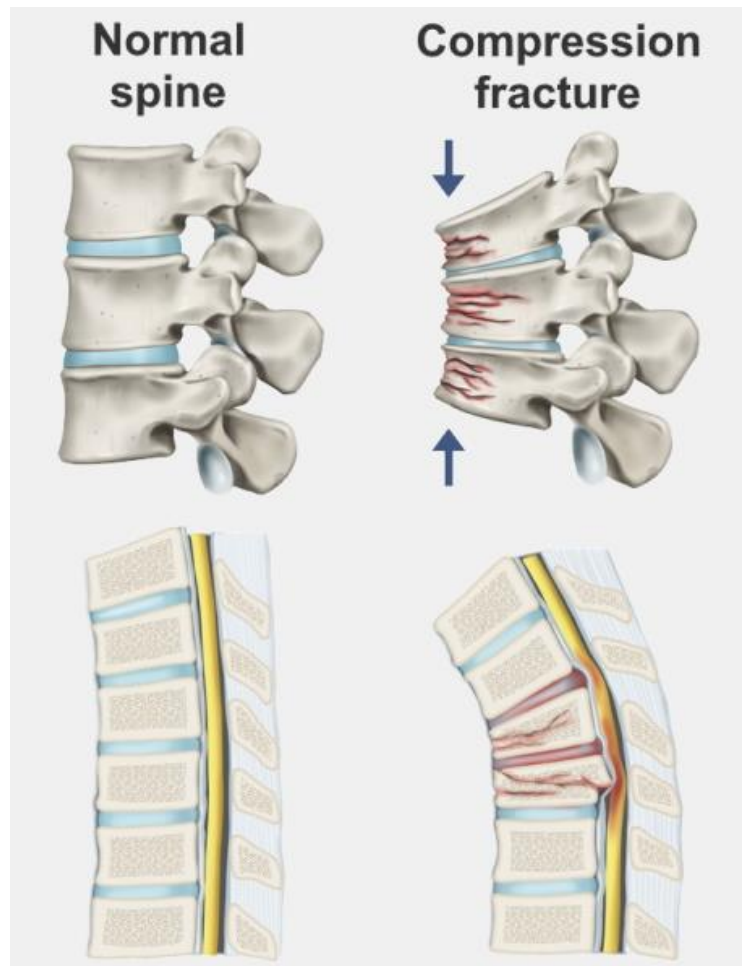
## Tāwhatiwhatinga kōpeketanga tuaiwi

A vertebral compression fracture (also called a spinal compression fracture) is a break that happens in the bones that make up your spine. It can be caused by an accident like a fall. If you have osteoporosis (thinning of your bones), it can be caused by a minor incident such as a sneeze.

Most people with a vertebral compression fracture have a sharp pain in their back. The pain is worse if they bend forwards, walk in a stooped position or sit relaxed in a chair. It's also worse if they lie on their back in bed or get up from lying down. The pain eases when they walk upright. Some people have no pain at all.

When the fracture has healed there's no ongoing pain from the bone. But the other soft tissues around it can be painful if they've become tight during the healing process.

It's important that you keep active and have good posture during the first one to two months after the fracture happens. This helps ensure that everything heals the best it can.



## Preventing vertebral compression fractures

You can reduce your risk of having a compression fracture by keeping your bones strong. You can also reduce your risk if you minimise your risk of falling. For information about these subjects, search for “osteoporosis” and “falls” on [www.healthinfo.org.nz](http://www.healthinfo.org.nz).

## Diagnosing vertebral compression fractures

An X-ray is used to diagnose a vertebral compression fracture. If there's a fracture, the vertebral body (main part of the bone) will be a wedge shape rather than square (see the image).



## Treating vertebral compression fractures

The treatment for vertebral compression fractures aims at helping the natural healing of the broken bone. It tries to ensure you can return to all your normal activities without pain or stiffness.

In the initial few weeks, you may need some pain medication from your GP. You also may find it more comfortable to sleep in an armchair for a few nights. Try to get back into sleeping in your bed as soon as you can.

## Self-care for vertebral compression fractures

The most important thing you can do while your bone heals is to keep moving, but within the limits of your pain. Most people find gentle walking in an upright position helps relieve the pain. Bending backwards also helps.

Try to avoid movements that make your pain worse such as bending forward or sitting slouched. You may also find sitting with a pillow or cushion in the small of your back helps relieve the pain.

As your pain improves over the first one to two months, gradually increase the amount of activity you're doing. You should aim to be back to your normal level of activity within three to four months. If you're finding it painful to move or the pain isn't getting better, see your GP or physiotherapist.

## Getting help with vertebral compression fractures

If your pain is keeping you awake or stopping you being active, see your GP for pain medication.

If you aren't sure about the right exercises and activities to help the bone heal and to prevent any ongoing issues, see a physiotherapist for advice.

If you're finding it hard to do your normal daily activities, see an occupational therapist for advice.

If you're unsure about eating well for bone health, see a dietitian.

If your fracture was caused by osteoporosis (thinning of your bones), you should see your GP to discuss medication to keep your bones strong.

*Written by HealthInfo clinical advisers. Last reviewed May 2022.*