

# Hip Fractures

**H**ip fractures happen most often to older people who have osteoporosis, also known as “brittle bones.” A person with this condition is more susceptible to breaking a bone when an accidental fall occurs. Osteoporosis affects 25 percent of women over 60 and a smaller percentage of men.

A hip fracture actually means that the upper end of the thigh bone—or femur—gets broken. This can be a minor or major break in the bone structure. Sometimes the break is so small that it can barely be seen on an X-ray, and special bone scans may be needed to show the fracture. On the other hand, some fractures are very severe with many pieces of displaced bone. No matter how serious the fracture, surgery is almost always needed to stabilize the fracture or to replace the broken bone with a metal ball called a hip prosthesis.

There are several reasons why surgery is performed. First, it is the most effective and quickest way to relieve the pain of a hip fracture. Second, the patient can get out of bed by the next day into a chair or wheelchair, and can often start walking within several days after the surgery. This is particularly important since lying in bed for such a length of time can often lead to bedsores, pneumonia, blood clots, weak muscles, an increase in osteoporosis, or other complications. In the past, before advances in medicine permitted hip surgery to be performed safely, patients often had to lie in bed for weeks or even months before their fractures healed enough to allow them to sit. Many patients actually died before their hip fractures healed. These days, most patients survive hip fracture surgery and can resume a normal life after a few months of rehabilitation.

The best way to prevent a hip fracture is to prevent osteoporosis. To do this, everyone should follow these three steps throughout life, starting at the earliest age possible:

1. Get regular exercise, such as walking.
2. Get plenty of calcium in your diet. The best sources of calcium are low-fat or non-fat dairy products, but other sources include green, leafy vegetables, tofu, sardines, and supplements.
3. Don't smoke, and limit yourself to one alcoholic drink a day.

If you fall and cannot walk afterward, call Kaiser Permanente to order an ambulance. If you do indeed have a hip fracture, you'll probably be seen by an orthopedic surgeon. Depending on the location and severity of the fracture, the orthopedic surgeon may place pins through a small incision, insert a large screw that connects with a long plate that sits on the thigh bone, or insert a metal ball (or prosthesis) that has a stem that fits into the marrow cavity of the thigh bone.

Once the fracture is fixed, it still has to heal—a process that takes at least three months. The prostheses, pins, or screws stay in permanently. Sometimes the hip develops pain and arthritis after a hip fracture. In some cases, an artificial joint—known as a total hip replacement—may be needed to relieve the pain.

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**For more health information ...**

- Connect to our Web site at *members.kp.org*
- Check your *Kaiser Permanente Healthwise Handbook*.
- Listen to the Kaiser Permanente Healthphone at 1-800-332-7563. For TTY, call 1-800-777-9059.
- Visit your facility's Health Education Department for books, videos, classes, and additional resources.

This information is not intended to diagnose health problems or to take the place of medical advice or care you receive from your physician or other medical professional. If you have persistent health problems, or if you have additional questions, please consult with your doctor.