New Surgery for Spine Fractures Offers Immediate Pain Relief

by Ted Braun

Conventional back surgery for fractured vertebrae caused by osteoporosis and/or injury has been an unappealing option for patients because of the large incisions, substantial discomfort, and lengthy recovery period. But recent advances in back surgery may reverse all those negatives.

Dr. Arya "Nick" Shamie, a spine surgeon with the UCLA Comprehensive Spine Center in Santa Monica, recently performed the first kyphoplasty procedure at Santa Monica-UCLA Medical Center. This minimally invasive surgery can provide immediate pain relief, while stabilizing the bone and restoring lost height caused by the compression fracture.

"About 80 to 90 percent of patients have immediate pain relief after kyphoplasty and can return to their normal routine within days," says Dr. Shamie. "With conventional surgery, they would have a lengthy hospital stay, followed by months of rehabilitation."

Surgeons perform kyphoplasty by placing a probe into the vertebrae through a half-inch incision in the back. Next, they insert a special balloon through the probe and gently inflate it to bring the compressed bone to its desired height. When the balloon is removed, it creates a cavity inside the vertebrae. Finally, they inject bone cement into the cavity to stabilize the fracture. "The cement acts as an internal cast to hold the bone in place until it properly heals," Dr. Shamie explains.

Sylvia Cloutier underwent kyphoplasty last December. Although her recovery was complicated by another, unrelated back problem, she has experienced significant pain relief. "Overall, I'm pleased with my results," says Ms. Cloutier, an office manager who lives in Westchester. "It was better than the alternatives of bed rest or major surgery."

Adds Dr. Shamie, "Kyphoplasty is definitely another pivotal step forward in the rapidly advancing field of minimally invasive surgery." ■

For more information about Kyphoplasty, call the UCLA Comprehensive Spine Center at 310-319-DISK.