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Height loss in postmenopausal women may indicate spinal fracture

Loss of height in postmenopausal women may indicate a vertebral fracture, states an article in *CMAJ (Canadian Medical Association Journal)* (pre-embargo link only)

<http://www.cmaj.ca/embargo/cmaj090710.pdf>

Height loss is common as people age and is associated with back pain. Causes include changes in the curvature of the spine, narrowing of intervertebral discs and vertebral fractures.

Two-thirds of adults have back pain at any time. Diagnosing these treatable disorders, however, sparks controversy because it is not known if the benefits outweigh the harm of unnecessary radiographs.

Researchers from France conducted a study to compare postmenopausal women and analyze reasons for height loss. The study included 1779 randomly selected general practitioners who were each asked to recruit five female patients over the age of 60. A total of 8610 patients were included in the study.

"We observed a mean loss of height of 4.5 cm since early adulthood in a large population of postmenopausal women in primary care practices," write Dr. Karine Briot, Hôpital Cochin and Université Paris Descartes, Paris, France and coauthors. "We found that the risk of an existing vertebral fracture was significantly higher among patients with a height loss of at least 4 cm."

The authors conclude that measurement of height loss could be an accurate method for detecting vertebral fractures. Actual height of women was different from what the patients reported. General practitioners need to measure patients and not rely on estimates.

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