

Some cancers can metastasize to bones, making them weak

Question: My relative with cancer now has fragile bones. Is that from the cancer or its treatment?

Answer: This is a common question when patients with cancer in the breast or prostate are told they now have bone cancer. This also can happen with a few other cancers, such as kidney, lung or thyroid.

Called metastatic carcinoma, this type of bone cancer is from the cancer spreading to the bones, which can become weakened and even break. A bone that breaks due to metastatic cancer is referred to as a pathologic fracture. These fractures are typically in unusual locations.



Ask the Expert
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Pathologic fractures can require specialized surgical treatments and techniques. They also do not heal like regular broken bones because of the radiation and/or chemotherapy treatments the patient may be undergoing. Occasionally, the broken bone is simply removed and replaced with specialized implants.

If a bone affected by metastatic cancer has little or no damage, a patient may be treated with radiation. However, if a bone is so weakened that a fracture is impending, surgery to stabilize the bone may be recommended, followed by radiation. Many times this surgery involves placing rods or pins. Studies have shown that patients treated prior to a pathologic fracture have less pain, less complications and shorter hospital stays.

Whether the cancer patient's bone appears likely to break or is already fractured, it's important to seek the correct diagnosis and appropriate treatment from an experienced expert. The Virginia G. Piper Cancer Center at Scottsdale Healthcare recently launched a pathologic fracture service. The program also provides patients with access to a full spectrum of patient care and support services.

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