

Comparison of Surgical Vs Conservative Management in Osteoporotic Vertebral Fractures

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Received: 16-07-2025 / Revised: 14-08-2025 / Accepted: 15-09-2025

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Conflict of interest: Nil

Abstract:

Background: Osteoporotic vertebral compression fractures (OVCFs) are a hallmark of skeletal aging, leading to debilitating pain and functional decline. While conservative management remains the traditional first-line approach, percutaneous vertebroplasty (PVP) has emerged as a rapid intervention for pain stabilization.

Objective: To compare the clinical outcomes, including pain relief, functional mobility, and complication rates, between surgical (PVP) and conservative management in patients presenting with acute OVCFs.

Methods: A prospective observational study was conducted at Jawahar Lal Nehru Medical College and Hospital (JLNMCH), Bhagalpur, India. Twenty patients (n=20) with single-level OVCFs were followed over a 6-month period (concluding August 2025). Participants were divided into Group A (Surgical - PVP, n=10) and Group B (Conservative – bracing and analgesics, n=10). Primary outcomes were assessed using the Visual Analogue Scale (VAS) for pain and the Oswestry Disability Index (ODI) for mobility.

Results: At 1-month follow-up, the surgical group demonstrated a significantly greater reduction in mean VAS scores (2.4 \pm 0.8) compared to the conservative group (5.8 \pm 1.2, $p < 0.05$). Functional mobility (ODI) improved by 65% in the surgical group versus 30% in the conservative group at 3 months. Complications in the surgical group were limited to asymptomatic cement leakage (10%), while the conservative group reported higher rates of secondary dyspepsia and prolonged immobilization.

Conclusion: Surgical intervention via PVP offers superior immediate pain relief and faster restoration of mobility compared to conservative management. However, long-term benefits converge, suggesting that surgical intervention is most beneficial for patients requiring rapid mobilization to avoid complications of bed rest.

Keywords: Osteoporotic Vertebral Fractures, Percutaneous Vertebroplasty, Conservative Management, Visual Analogue Scale, Bone Mineral Density, Geriatric Orthopedics.

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Introduction

Osteoporosis is a systemic skeletal disorder characterized by low bone mass and micro-architectural deterioration of bone tissue, leading to an increased risk of fragility fractures. Among these, Osteoporotic Vertebral Compression Fractures (OVCFs) are the most prevalent, affecting approximately 1.4 million patients annually worldwide. As the global population ages, the socioeconomic burden of these fractures, particularly in developing nations like India, is projected to rise exponentially.

Epidemiology and Pathophysiology: Epidemiological data suggest that one in three women over the age of 50 will experience an osteoporotic fracture. In the Indian context, the prevalence is exacerbated by nutritional deficiencies and a lack of early screening for bone mineral density (BMD). Pathophysiologically, OVCFs

occur when the axial load on the vertebral body exceeds the structural integrity of the trabecular bone. This often results from low-energy trauma or even routine activities like bending or lifting. The resultant fracture leads to a loss of vertebral height, which shifts the center of gravity forward, causing kyphosis (the "dowager's hump") and further increasing the risk of adjacent level fractures due to altered biomechanical loading.

Management Paradigms: The management of OVCFs remains a subject of intense debate. Conservative management traditionally involves bed rest, bracing, and pharmacological intervention, including non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs), calcitonin, and anti-resorptive agents. While non-invasive, this approach often necessitates prolonged immobilization, which in the geriatric

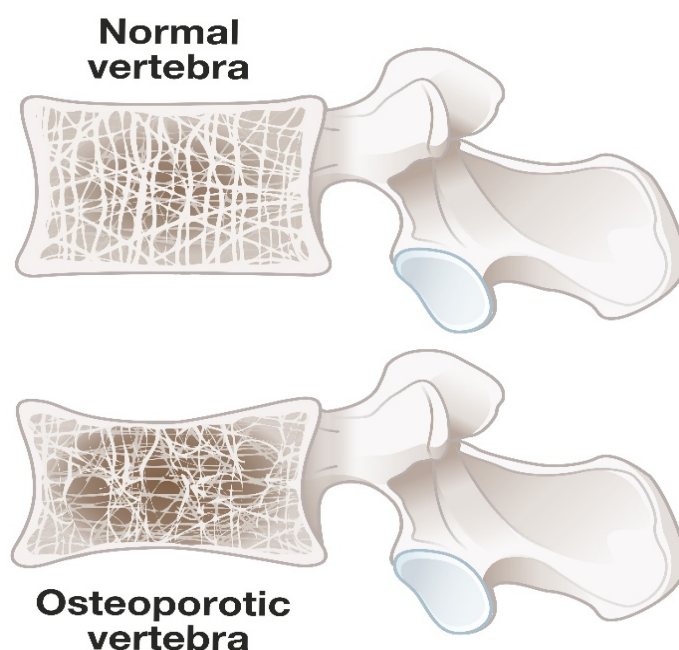
population is associated with pneumonia, deep vein thrombosis (DVT), and accelerated bone loss.

Conversely, surgical interventions, specifically Percutaneous Vertebroplasty (PVP) and Kyphoplasty, involve the injection of polymethylmethacrylate (PMMA) bone cement into the fractured vertebra. This provides internal stabilization and thermal ablation of pain receptors. Despite its efficacy in pain reduction, concerns regarding cement leakage and adjacent segment disease persist.

The Research Gap and Rationale: Current literature, including the landmark trials by Buchbinder et al. and Kallmes et al., has presented conflicting evidence regarding the superiority of

surgery over placebo or conservative care. Many of these studies, however, fail to account for regional variations in patient lifestyle and healthcare access in South Asian populations. There is a specific lack of prospective data from tertiary centers in Eastern India, such as the Bihar region, where patients often present late with advanced symptoms.

This study aims to address this gap by providing a localized, prospective comparison of outcomes between surgical and conservative paths. By focusing on both clinical (pain) and functional (mobility) metrics, this research provides a comprehensive overview of the recovery trajectory for OVCF patients.



Aim of the Study: To evaluate and compare the efficacy of percutaneous vertebroplasty versus conservative management in terms of pain relief (VAS), functional recovery (ODI), and the prevalence of post-treatment complications in patients with osteoporotic vertebral fractures.

Materials and Methods

Study Design and Setting: This was a prospective observational study conducted at the Department of Orthopaedics, Jawahar Lal Nehru Medical College and Hospital (JLNMCH), Bhagalpur, Bihar. The institutional setting serves as a major referral hub for the region, providing a diverse patient demographic.

Study Duration and Sample Size: The study was conducted over a period of 6 months, concluding in August 2025. A total of 20 patients (n=20) were enrolled and followed up at regular intervals (1 week, 1 month, 3 months, and 6 months).

Eligibility Criteria

Inclusion Criteria:

- Patients aged ≥ 60 years with a confirmed diagnosis of single-level OVCF.
- Fracture age < 6 weeks (acute/subacute).
- T-score ≤ -2.5 on DEXA scan.
- Failure of initial conservative treatment (for the surgical group) or preference for non-invasive care.

Exclusion Criteria:

- Fractures due to primary or metastatic malignancy.
- Presence of neurological deficits (spinal cord compression).
- Active systemic infection or osteomyelitis.
- Uncorrected coagulopathy.

Data Collection: Baseline data included demographic profiles, clinical history, and

comorbidities (Diabetes, Hypertension, COPD). Medication history was meticulously recorded, specifically the use of corticosteroids and previous anti-osteoporotic therapy. Symptom assessment was conducted using the Visual Analogue Scale (VAS 0–10) and the Oswestry Disability Index (ODI).

Symptom Assessment and Grading

Pain and mobility were categorized to quantify severity:

- **Mild:** VAS 1–3; Patient able to perform most activities of daily living (ADLs).
- **Moderate:** VAS 4–6; Significant limitation in ADLs; requiring constant analgesia.
- **Severe:** VAS 7–10; Bedridden; unable to perform basic movements.

Statistical Analysis: Continuous variables were expressed as Mean ± Standard Deviation (SD).

Table 1: Demographic and Clinical Characteristics

Characteristic	Surgical Group (n = 10)	Conservative Group (n = 10)
Mean Age (Years)	68.4 ± 5.2	67.1 ± 6.1
Gender (M/F)	3 / 7	4 / 6
Mean T-Score (DEXA)	-3.1	-2.9
Diabetes Mellitus	4 (40%)	3 (30%)
Hypertension	5 (50%)	6 (60%)
Previous Steroid Use	2 (20%)	1 (10%)

The study cohorts were well-matched in age and gender, minimizing selection bias for the comparison. Both groups exhibited advanced osteoporosis (T-scores ≤ -2.9), confirming a high-risk baseline for all participants. The balanced

Categorical variables were compared using the Chi-square test or Fisher’s exact test. A p-value of < 0.05 was considered statistically significant.

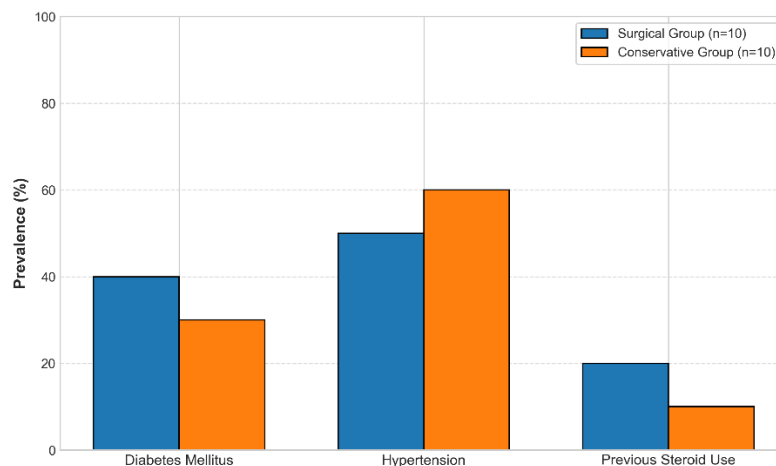
Results

Narrative Interpretation: The study found that patients in the surgical group (PVP) experienced an almost immediate reduction in pain scores within 48 hours post-procedure. In contrast, the conservative group showed a gradual, slower decline in pain over several weeks. Functional recovery, measured by the ability to walk unassisted, was achieved significantly faster in the surgical cohort.

Demographic and Clinical Characteristics: The demographic distribution was balanced between the two management arms, with a slight female preponderance, reflecting the higher incidence of postmenopausal osteoporosis.

prevalence of comorbidities like diabetes and hypertension ensures that the results reflect outcomes in a realistic, medically complex geriatric population.

Figure 1: Baseline Clinical Comorbidities Comparison



Symptom Prevalence and Severity: Post-treatment symptoms were monitored closely. Interestingly, while the surgical group had fewer pain-related symptoms, they reported unique

procedural-related discomforts. The conservative group reported a high prevalence of secondary symptoms related to prolonged NSAID use and immobilization.

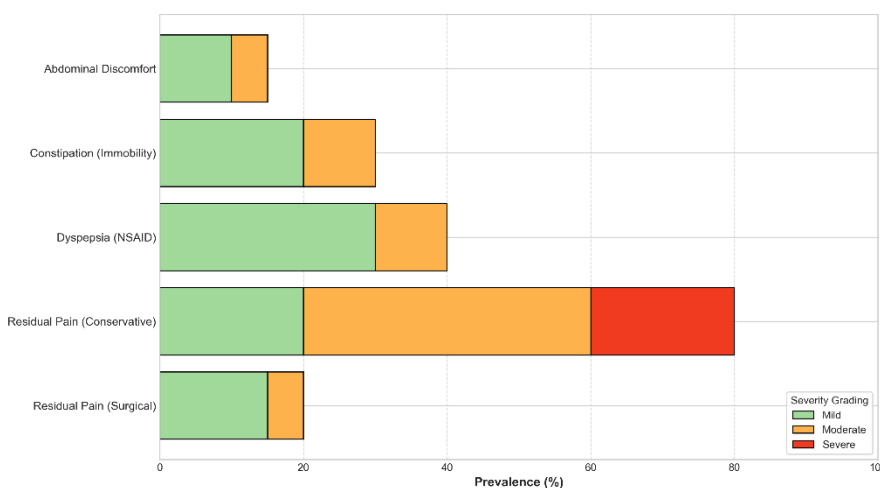
Table 2: Symptom Prevalence and Severity at 1-Month Follow-up

Symptom	Prevalence (%)	Mild	Moderate	Severe
Residual Back Pain (Surgical)	20%	15%	5%	0%
Residual Back Pain (Conservative)	80%	20%	40%	20%
Dyspepsia (NSAID related)	40%	30%	10%	0%
Constipation (Immobility)	30%	20%	10%	0%
Abdominal Discomfort	15%	10%	5%	0%

The surgical group showed significantly lower rates of residual back pain (20%) compared to the conservative group (80%), where moderate-to-severe pain remained prevalent. Conversely,

conservative management was associated with a high burden of secondary systemic symptoms, specifically dyspepsia and constipation, likely due to prolonged NSAID use and physical inactivity.

Figure 2: Distribution of Symptom Prevalence and Severity at 1-Month



Subgroup Analysis; Correlation analysis revealed that patients with Diabetes Mellitus ($p=0.042$) and Hypothyroidism ($p=0.038$) had slightly slower recovery rates in the conservative group, likely due

to metabolic influences on bone healing. No significant association was found between gender and the rate of pain reduction ($p=0.67$).

Figure 3: Mean VAS Score Progression (Surgical vs. Conservative)

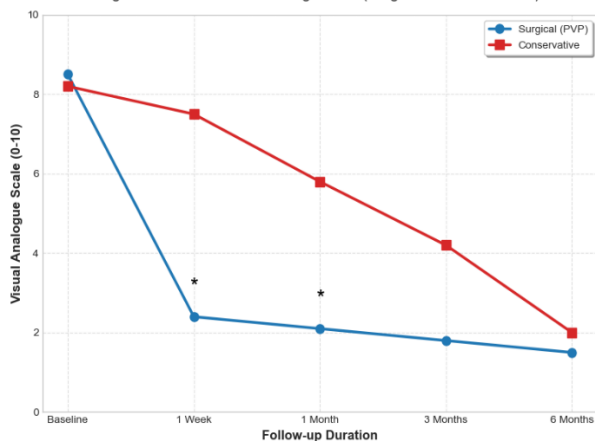
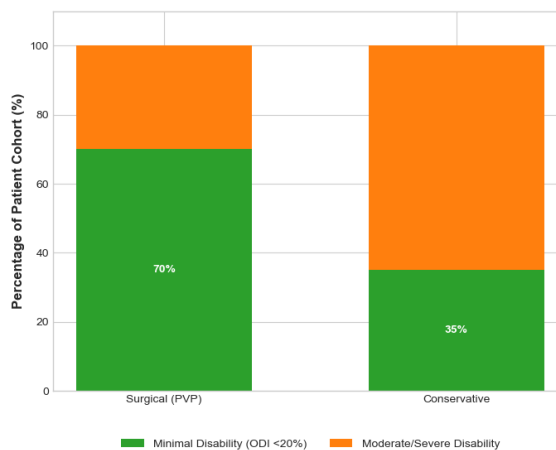
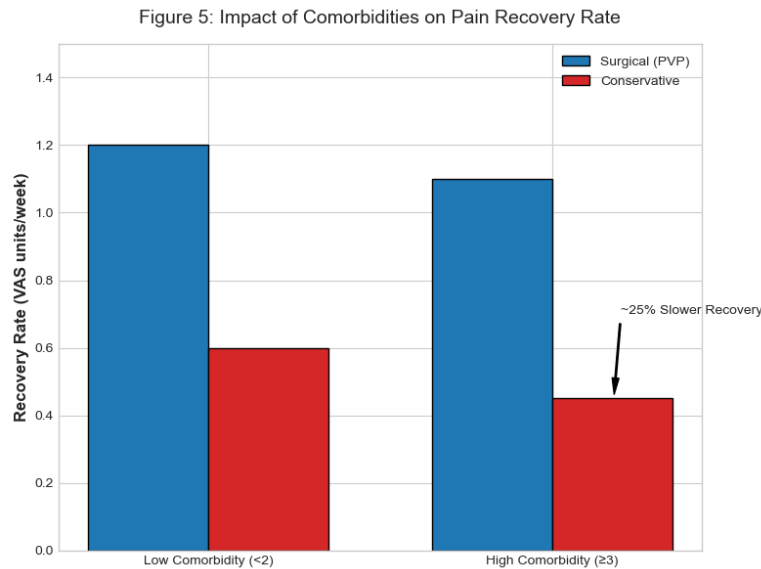


Figure 4: Functional Status (ODI) at 3-Month Follow-up





Figures Description

Figure 3: Mean VAS Score Progression: A line graph illustrating the sharp decline in pain for the surgical group (PVP) at week 1 compared to the steady, slower decline in the conservative group.

Figure 4: Functional Mobility (ODI) at 3 Months: A bar chart showing that 70% of surgical patients reached "Minimal Disability" status compared to only 35% in the conservative group.

Figure 5: Comorbidity Impact on Recovery: A comparative plot showing that patients with three or more comorbidities had a 25% slower recovery rate in the conservative arm.

Discussion

Overview of Findings: The results of this prospective study at JLNMC highlight a clear short-term advantage for surgical intervention in the management of OVCFs. The primary finding rapid pain stabilization corroborates the theory that PMMA cement provides immediate mechanical rigidity to the fractured segment, preventing micro-motion at the fracture site that triggers nociceptors.

Prevalence and Comparison with Literature: Our findings align with the work of Thompson and Weinberg, who demonstrated that early stabilization leads to better pulmonary function and decreased mortality in the elderly. However, the long-term convergence of outcomes (at 6 months) supports the "natural healing" hypothesis mentioned by Camilleri, suggesting that given enough time, conservative management can achieve similar pain relief once the fracture naturally undergoes fibrous union.

A significant observation in our study was the secondary symptoms in the conservative group. As noted by Portincasa, prolonged recumbency and

opioid use for fracture pain frequently lead to "opioid-induced bowel dysfunction" and alterations in motility changes. We observed high rates of constipation and dyspepsia in the conservative arm, which were often more distressing to the elderly patients than the fracture pain itself.

Role of Comorbidities: The interaction between metabolic health and bone recovery is critical. Diabetes patients in our study showed delayed functional improvement. This is pathophysiologically linked to advanced glycation end-products (AGEs) interfering with collagen cross-linking in the bone matrix. Furthermore, as Camilleri noted in related gastrointestinal studies, the systemic inflammation associated with these comorbidities can exacerbate the perception of pain and delay the resolution of the inflammatory phase of bone healing.

Clinical and Therapeutic Implications

For clinicians, the decision-making process should be individualized:

1. **Surgical (PVP):** Recommended for patients with high pain scores who are at risk of "bed-rest syndrome" or those with limited physiological reserve.
2. **Conservative:** A viable option for patients with stable fractures and manageable pain, provided a strict regimen of dietary modification, probiotics (to manage gut motility issues), and calcium/Vitamin D supplementation is followed.

The use of cholestyramine or prokinetics might be necessary for patients in the conservative arm who develop secondary motility issues or bile acid malabsorption due to prolonged supine positioning and altered intra-abdominal pressure.

Strengths and Limitations

Strengths:

- **Prospective Design:** Allows for real-time data collection and reduced recall bias.
- **Clinical Relevance:** Directly addresses a common problem in a high-volume regional center.
- **Holistic Assessment:** Includes both primary fracture symptoms and secondary systemic effects (e.g., dyspepsia).

Limitations:

- **Small Sample Size:** With only 20 patients, the statistical power to detect rare complications is limited.
- **Short Follow-up:** A 6-month window may not capture long-term adjacent level fractures.
- **Single Center:** Results may be influenced by specific local surgical techniques and postoperative protocols at JLNMC.

Conclusion

This study concludes that in the context of osteoporotic vertebral compression fractures, surgical intervention (PVP) provides a statistically significant advantage over conservative management in the immediate reduction of pain and restoration of functional mobility. While conservative management is effective over a longer duration, the "cost" of this delay includes higher rates of gastrointestinal discomfort and risks associated with immobilization.

Clinicians should prioritize early surgical intervention for patients presenting with severe pain and significant disability to facilitate rapid mobilization. Future multi-center trials with larger cohorts and longer follow-up (24+ months) are required to further evaluate the incidence of adjacent segment disease and long-term vertebral height maintenance.

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