

Elaine, 59

Consumer advocate, GP practice manager, mum & grandmother living with severe osteoporosis, *MELBOURNE*

Consumer advocate, GP practice manager, mother-to-three, and grandmother to three, Elaine, 59, Melbourne, relishes the precious time she spends with her gorgeous grandchildren. However, her life-altering diagnosis of osteoporosis three years ago has left her feeling old, fragile and with limited mobility.

At 52 years of age, Elaine was overwhelmed by sudden and severe lower back pain after making a slight twisting movement while cooking in her kitchen.

The pain persisted for the ensuing three years, during which Elaine sought professional help from various specialists (including a rheumatologist, a neurosurgeon and four pain physicians). During this period, she was misdiagnosed and treated for spinal arthritis. Elaine was, however, unable to fathom how this form of arthritis was causing her such excruciating pain.

After noticing a slight curvature in her upper back in 2019, Elaine, then aged 55, requested a bone mineral density (BMD) scan from her GP. When the scan revealed she was living with severe osteoporosis, Elaine was immediately referred to an endocrinologist. Further tests identified vertebral fractures, and revealed she was also living with hyperparathyroidism (overactive parathyroid glands in the neck that cause various health problems, and can be a risk factor for osteoporosis), and vitamin D deficiency.

Today, Elaine is sharing her story to encourage other Australians to be proactive about their bone health, and to seek an accurate medical diagnosis. She is a Consumer Advocate, and Member of the Healthy Bones Australia (HBA) National Consumer Advisory Committee. She believes Australians aged 50 years and over with risk factors for osteoporosis, need to be routinely investigated, similar to the routine checks available to those living with other chronic diseases.

This is Elaine's story.

After developing severe lower back pain at 52 years of age, Elaine proactively sought professional advice from various medical specialists. Over a three-year-long period, she endured ongoing and unexplained lower back pain, for which she was prescribed various medications for chronic pain, anti-depressants, and even sleeping pills to help manage her pain. This included spinal injections for her misdiagnosed osteoarthritis, and 10 months of physiotherapy.

"I had medications and physiotherapy for other conditions they thought were causing my pain. I responded poorly to my weekly physiotherapy sessions, and often felt more pain and stiffness at the end of each session," said Elaine.

Elaine relentlessly sought other professional opinions due to her ongoing pain.



In 2019, after noticing a slight hump in her upper back, Elaine requested a referral for a BMD scan. The results revealed she had severe osteoporosis, which led to her immediate referral to an endocrinologist for further examination, and to commence treatment.

Although relieved to have finally secured a correct diagnosis of osteoporosis, her disease has proven life-altering, given her spinal fractures that have severely limited her normal life. She now has restricted sitting, standing, and walking endurance.

"I can no longer perform any gardening or household jobs that involve bending or lifting, and over time, even standing in the kitchen while cooking has become a problem. So, I rely on my husband to do all of our housework and laundry.

"Not being able to lift my grandchildren has been devastating. I had always dreamed of being able to play with them, and babysit when needed. But now someone else has to pick them up and put them on my lap," Elaine said.

Elaine has an extensive family history of bone disease. Her mum was diagnosed with osteoporosis at 70 years of age, and her sister fractured both humerus bones at 52 years of age, following a fall.

"Despite my family history of bone disease, it never crossed my mind, nor was it even suggested to me, that I may be at risk for developing osteoporosis, even after going through menopause.

"I exercised, ate well, and had boundless energy. I've never smoked, and I don't drink," said Elaine.

"Because I had never experienced any falls, no one suspected I was living with bone fractures. So, I'm not actually sure how long I have been living with osteoporosis."

Today, Elaine receives ongoing osteoporosis treatment, and takes daily supplements, including vitamin D and calcium. She also wears a brace to support her back.

Elaine maintains heightened public awareness of bone health is urgently required to help the prevention of painful but unnecessary fractures.

"I know first-hand the impact of osteoporosis. My late diagnosis has resulted in years of ongoing pain and many fractures. Had I been diagnosed prior to fracturing, perhaps I would not be living this restricted lifestyle.

"I encourage every Australian to protect their bones by taking the *Know Your Bones* self-assessment, and having a bone density test if they have risk factors for osteoporosis.

"Importantly, talk to your doctor about your bone health to help prevent osteoporosis," Elaine said.

"The disease has substantially affected my life, and I want others to avoid the pain and disability I have gone through, and continue to endure."

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MEDIA CONTACTS

Kirsten Bruce and Millie Chamberlain VIVA! Communications

M 0401 717 566 | 0404 568 615

T 02 9968 3741 | 02 9968 3741

E kirstenbruce@vivacommunications.com.au

millie@vivacommunications.com.au