TUPELO, Miss.— Most people might have sore muscles after using a chain saw on a big job, but Douglas Johnston found himself in a much more serious predicament.

“I was cutting down a dead tree in our horse pasture and a tree limb fell on me,” said the 73-year-old Plantersville resident. “I was in a lot of pain. I could hardly walk.” The accident happened late one Friday afternoon in May, and the next morning he reported to Barnes Crossing Urgent Care. The X-ray and MRI identified the culprit as two broken vertebrae.

His doctor referred him to local neurosurgeon Elbert White, M.D., but unfortunately Johnston was not a candidate for back surgery. “Dr. White told me about the balloon kyphoplasty procedure, and I had never heard of it,” Johnston said. Vertebrae are the 33 small bones that join together in a line to form the spine. Balloon kyphoplasty is a minimally invasive technique that uses orthopedic balloons and cement to create an internal cast to repair the fracture.

Dr. White referred him to Richard Arriola, M.D., an interventional radiologist on North Mississippi Medical Center’s medical staff. “This procedure is a wonderful treatment, especially for individuals who are not medically stable enough to undergo spine surgery,” Dr. Arriola explained.

The patient is mildly sedated for the procedure, which takes about 20 minutes to perform. Through two 1-centimeter incisions in the back, the doctor inserts two tiny balloons into the fractured bone. Inflating the balloons realigns the vertebrae. Once the balloons are deflated and removed, the space inside the bone is filled with a special cement to set the bone, forming an internal cast.

Unlike Johnston, who suffered trauma, about 90 percent of patients who undergo balloon kyphoplasty have osteoporosis, a disease that weakens bones and makes them more likely to break. “By the time a person reaches 90 years of age, there is a 75 percent chance that he or she will have a fracture caused by osteoporosis,” Dr. Arriola said. “With our aging population, we are going to see even more of it.”
Fortunately, balloon kyphoplasty offers an attractive treatment option. “Most patients experience relief as soon as they get off the table,” Dr. Arriola said.

Johnston agrees. “I felt better almost immediately,” he said. “I went home from the hospital within a few hours. I took it easy for two weeks and just didn’t lift anything heavy.”

Now Johnston is back to “piddling around a little bit on the farm every day,” but he did make one concession. “My wife told me to get rid of my chain saw,” he said.

For best results, Dr. Arriola encourages early diagnosis and treatment. “The sooner you come see us, the more relief you will get,” he said.

Balloon kyphoplasty is covered by Medicare and most insurance companies. In addition to Dr. Arriola, the procedure is also done by interventional radiologists Jeff Howard, M.D., and Clint Smith, M.D. For more information, ask your physician or call 1-800-THE DESK (1-800-843-3375).

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Sidebar:

Don’t Turn Your Back on Back Pain

Your backache may be a normal part of getting older. But if that backache is caused by a spinal fracture, it can set the stage for more fractures, resulting in a hunched, deformed spine. Spinal fractures can happen from something as dramatic as a fall, or from a simple movement like coughing, sneezing or reaching. Know your risk factors:

- Have you ever been diagnosed with osteoporosis or low bone mineral density?
- Are you currently experiencing back pain?
- Is the back pain worsened by weight-bearing activities such as bending forward or walking?
- Has the pain lasted for more than three days with no improvement?
- Are you over 50 years old or postmenopausal?
- Has anyone in your family been diagnosed with osteoporosis or have any of your relatives ever had a broken hip, a spinal fracture or a hunched back?
- Do you have a hunched back or have you noticed any height loss?
- Have you ever had a broken bone over the age of 50 or have you been diagnosed with a spinal fracture or vertebral compression fracture?
- Have you ever been diagnosed with cancer or taken steroid medication?

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