

Rib Fractures and Chest Injury

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The information in this leaflet is for patients who have had an injury to the chest wall, including:

- Fractured ribs
- Fractured sternum (breastbone)
- Chest wall bruising

Chest injury

Injuries to the chest can be very painful. Unlike other parts of the body, it is difficult to rest your chest as you use it when you breathe and it supports you when you sit up and lie down.

As a rough guide, rib and sternum fracture take about four to six weeks to heal and it is common to still feel some discomfort after this time. Bruising can take between two to four weeks to heal.

Pain is one of the main problems experienced after chest injuries. The amount of pain you feel and how long it may last for will depend on the type and severity of injury you have sustained. You may experience pain when breathing, coughing or sneezing. The pain may be severe and painkillers may not fully settle the pain, but it is important to use them as recommended by the medical team.

Complications

Taking deep breaths and coughing are important normal actions that we do every day, which helps us to avoid developing chest infections.

If you have suffered a chest injury, you may experience an increase in the amount of sputum (phlegm) you produce in the days following your injury.

Chest infections are one of the most common complications after suffering a chest injury. This occurs because you may not be able to take deep breaths or adequately cough up sputum due to discomfort, combined with not moving around as much as usual. Such an infection will usually require antibiotic treatment.

Less common complications:

- **Pneumothorax** (air in the space surrounding the lung causing the lung to 'collapse')
- **Haemothorax** (blood in the space surrounding the lung)
- **Subcutaneous emphysema** (trapped air under the skin)
- **Abdominal injuries** (e.g., liver or spleen damage)

Treatment

Dos:

- ✓ Take regular pain relief as prescribed by the healthcare professional or as it says on the box.
- ✓ Remain mobile. Ensure you get up and move around a little at least every hour. This is the most effective way to help with deep breathing and to clear sputum.
- ✓ Take regular deep breaths using the following technique – take a breath as deeply as possible, hold it, and then let the breath out as far as possible. Repeat five times.
- ✓ If you need to cough, support the chest with gentle pressure (using your hand, a cushion or a towel). This should make it less painful and allow you to clear your chest.

- ✓ If you are a smoker try to stop smoking. This will be helpful to you in the long term. However, initially it may result in you producing more and coughing up thicker sputum.
- ✓ Keep your shoulders moving during light everyday activities.
- ✓ Keep an eye on your symptoms for signs of complications.

Don'ts:

- ✗ Stay lying down or remain still for long periods of time.
- ✗ Lift, pull or push anything heavy or that makes your pain worsen.
- ✗ Smoke.
- ✗ Try to strap up or bind your ribs. We now believe that this can be harmful as your ribs will heal in exactly the same way by themselves.

What to do if you feel unwell when you get home

If you feel that your condition is not improving in the timeframe that has been explained to you it is likely that you need to be reassessed.

Please contact your GP if you experience any of the following:

- Sputum becomes discoloured
- You develop a temperature
- You start coughing blood

If your condition worsens or you experience any of the following please dial 999 immediately or if are able attend you local emergency department:

- Ongoing or increased shortness of breath
- Increased chest pain
- A new pain which is not near your injury

Your Feedback

We want your visit to be as comfortable as possible - talk to the person in charge if you have any concerns. If the ward/department staff are unable to resolve it, then ask for our Patient Advice and Liaison (PALS) information. Please be assured that raising a concern will not impact on your care.

Before leaving please complete a Friends and Family Test feedback card.

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OUR VALUES

Collaboration	We work positively with others to achieve shared aims	
Accountability	We act with professionalism and integrity, delivering what we commit to, embedding learning when things do not go to plan	
Respect	We are anti-discriminatory, treating people fairly and creating a sense of belonging and pride	
Empowerment	We speak out when things don't feel right, we are innovative and make changes to support continuous improvement	
Support	We are compassionate, listen attentively and are kind to ourselves and each other	



The hospital can arrange for an interpreter or person to sign to assist you in communicating effectively with staff during your stay. Please let us know.

For a large print version of this leaflet, contact PALS

01493 453240