

Rib fractures and chest injury

Information for patients



This leaflet has been written to give you information about the injury to your chest wall, including:

- fractured ribs
- fractured sternum (breastbone)
- chest wall bruising.

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.

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 of injury you have and how badly you have been hurt. As a rough guide, fractured ribs and sternums take about 4-6 weeks to heal and it is usual to still feel some discomfort after this time. Bruising can take between 2-4 weeks to heal.

Complications

Taking deep breaths and coughing are important normal actions that our bodies do every day. They help us to avoid developing chest infections.

If you have suffered a chest injury, you may have 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. Because you may be in pain, this can mean you are uncomfortable when trying to take a deep breath or cough up sputum. Combined with the fact that you may not be moving around as much as usual, this can mean that you are more likely to develop a chest infection.

Other, less common complications include:

- **Pneumothorax** (air in the space surrounding the lung which may cause shortness of breath, increasing chest pain, or pain that is not near the fracture)
- **Haemothorax** (blood in the space surrounding the lung can cause shortness of breath and pain in the lower chest)
- **Surgical emphysema** (air trapped under the skin can cause a bubbly swollen area on the chest wall and may be linked to a pneumothorax)
- **Abdominal injuries** (liver or spleen damage, which may cause pain in your abdomen or back).

Treatment

There are no specific treatments for rib or sternum fractures and chest wall bruising and it is not always necessary to have an X-ray. The most important thing you can do is to try to avoid developing a chest infection while your injury heals. There are things you can do when you have been discharged home from hospital to help prevent this from happening.

DO:

- Take regular pain relief – this will help you feel able to take deep breaths and cough.
- Keep mobile (e.g. walking) – this is the most effective way to help you to deep breathe and clear any sputum. It is also good to take regular deep breaths when you are sitting up or moving around.
- Cough when you need to and support your chest when coughing – you can support the painful area with a pillow, towel or your hand.
- If you smoke, seek help with stopping.
- Keep your shoulders moving with light everyday activities that you can manage without making your pain worse (unless you are told not to because of other injuries).
- Keep an eye on your symptoms for signs that they are getting worse.

This advice is especially important if you are a smoker. Visit www.smokefreelifeoxfordshire.co.uk/ for help and support with giving up smoking, or speak to your GP for advice.

DON'T:

- Stay lying down or still for long periods of time.
- Lift, pull or push anything which makes the pain worse.

What to do if you feel unwell when you get home

Even after following the above advice, you may still develop a chest infection after being discharged home.

Please seek further medical advice from your GP if you experience any of the following:

- your sputum becomes discoloured
- you become unwell with a high temperature
- you start coughing up blood.

If you need to contact your GP outside of normal surgery hours please call NHS 111 by dialling 111 free of charge from any landline or mobile.

If you experience any of the following symptoms you should always dial 999 immediately:

- **ongoing or worsening shortness of breath**
- **increasing chest pain**
- **a new pain which is not near your initial injury.**

Returning to work

If your job involves a lot of manual handling or lifting, you may need to discuss with your employer whether you can do other duties while your injury heals.

If you have any concerns about your return to work, it may be helpful to talk with your GP.

Further advice

This leaflet is a general guide to chest injuries. If you have any further queries about your current injuries, please contact your GP.

If you have a general concern and need further advice, please contact NHS 111 by dialling 111 free of charge from your landline or mobile phone.

If you have a specific requirement, need an interpreter, a document in Easy Read, another language, large print, Braille or audio version, please call **01865 221 473** or email **PALS@ouh.nhs.uk**

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