

Rib and chest wall injury

Emergency department Patient Information

Ribs can't be easily splinted or supported like other bones, so they're usually left to heal naturally. The break (fracture) or bruise usually heals in about four weeks. It is essential to have good pain relief during this time to enable you to breathe and cough properly. If it is painful, then it leads to shallow breathing and a risk of developing a chest infection.

Effective and safe pain relief is especially important for people who are more prone to chest infections. This includes, for example, smokers and people with persistent (chronic) chest conditions such as chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) or heart failure.

Advice:

- Take regular painkillers
- Hold an ice pack (or bag of frozen peas in a tea towel) to the affected ribs regularly in the first few days to bring down swelling
- Keep mobile as this is the most effective way to help you breathe normally. It is useful to take regular deep breaths when you are sitting up or lying down e.g. take 10 slow, deep breaths every hour to help clear your lungs
- Breathe normally and cough when you need to. If you need to cough, support the painful area with a pillow or with your hands
- Keep your shoulders moving with any movements that don't make the pain worse (unless you are unable to because of other injuries)
- Seek help with stopping smoking.

Please see your GP or come back to the Emergency Department if you:

- are short of breath
- have chest pain that is getting worse
- are coughing up blood
- are coughing up yellow or green mucus
- have a high temperature of 38°C or above.

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