

Advice for patients with a chest injury

The treatment for most people with chest wall injuries and, rib or sternal fractures is painkillers and breathing exercises. In more than half of cases, rib fractures do **NOT** show up on an x-ray so they are only done when there is concern for the underlying organs.

Painkillers

Please take **regular** painkillers to allow you to take a deep breath and cough. This will prevent you getting a chest infection. Most people find that paracetamol and ibuprofen are adequate, although some people will be given a prescription for stronger painkillers. As the pain improves you will be able to take the painkillers less frequently however it can be normal for it to take several months for the pain to go away.

Supported Coughing

Using the supported cough technique will help reduce your pain when coughing. You need to be able to cough and clear your chest to prevent a chest infection.

With the use of a towel or sheet you will find that this will support your injury and reduce the pain. The support will also reduce the movement and vibrations of any rib fractures. You will need to position the towel or sheet **over the area of pain**, in a similar position as shown in the photos below. Try both ways to find which way works best for you.



/

Breathing exercises

When doing breathing exercises, if required, support the injured area as described above. Try to time your exercises with when your painkillers are most effective. Some patients may be given a device to help with breathing exercises but if not, please follow the steps below.

Take a few deep breaths in and out, holding the last one for 10 seconds. Give a big cough and then repeat the deep breath. Do this 3 or 4 times an hour for the first few days, while the pain is severe, then less frequently as the pain improves and you are able to take deeper breaths anyway.

Smoking

Smokers are at higher risk of chest infections after injuries because of the damage cigarette smoke does to the lungs' defences. This means that it is especially important to follow these instructions. Stopping smoking will reduce the chances of infection.

IF YOU DEVELOP ANY OF THE FOLLOWING YOU SHOULD SEEK MEDICAL HELP

- Getting more breathless
- Coughing up blood
- Fever
- Change in shape of your chest
- Unable to cough at all
- Coughing up coloured phlegm
- Unusual movement of your ribs

If you have any other problems, or need further advice please contact:

- Your GP
- Emergency Department 01535 294481
- NHS 111 111, or 111.nhs.uk
- The NHS website www.nhs.uk - search for "rib injury"

Notes:

Are you a victim of Domestic Violence? For confidential advice, contact:

Bradford	0808 2800 999	https://www.stayingput.uk.net/contact
North Yorkshire	03000 110 110	https://www.idas.org.uk/
Lancashire	0300 323 0085	https://www.lancashire.gov.uk/health-and-social-care/your-health-and-wellbeing/domestic-abuse/

If you require this leaflet in other languages or formats please telephone the Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) on 01535 294019

Author: Emergency Department
Date of publication: April 2011
Revised: February 2022
Date of review: February 2025

www.airedaletrust.nhs.uk