

Chest wall injuries

Information for patients

If you require further information, please contact:

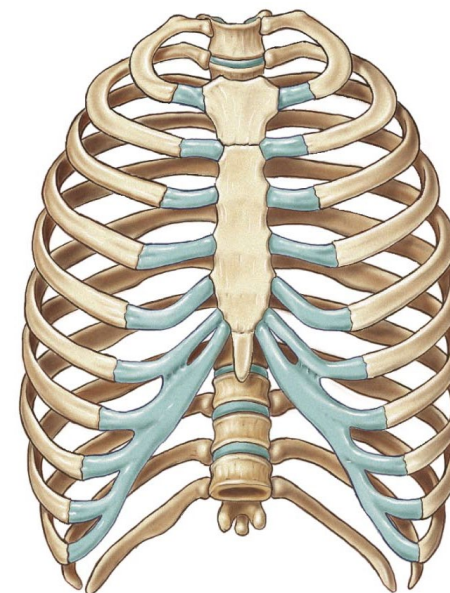
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Introduction

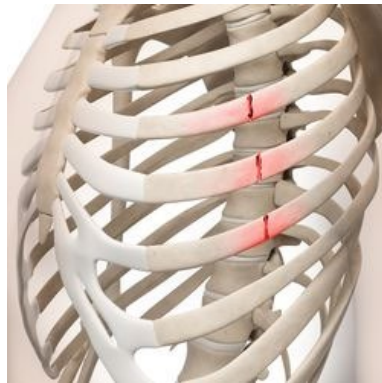
This leaflet provides information about injuries to the chest wall. It will tell you about the symptoms you may experience, how to prevent complications and what you can do to help your recovery, including general advice on returning to work and normal activities.

What is a chest wall injury?

Injuries to the chest wall normally occur as a result of high impact trauma, such as a fall, a road traffic accident or high impact sports.

Injuries can include:

- Fractured ribs (a break in one or more of your ribs)
- Fractured sternum (breast bone)
- Bruising to the lungs or chest wall



On average, these injuries usually heal within 4-6 weeks.

If you need to cough there are a number of things you can do:

- Take regular pain relief as prescribed by your doctor.
- Support your chest when you cough with a pillow, a towel or your hands. This will limit movement of the ribs, which should decrease the pain you feel.

Returning to work/normal activities

Depending on the severity of your injuries you may need to take some time off work. Returning to work will depend on the type of job you do. Your consultant and GP will guide you.

Strenuous activities should be avoided for the first 3-4 weeks, after which you can begin physical activity as pain allows. If the pain is increasing you may be doing too much.

Contact sports should be avoided for at least 6 weeks.

Physiotherapy discharge criteria

Before you go home, you should be able to:

- Manage your pain with painkillers
- Take a deep breath and cough to clear your chest if you have phlegm
- Mobilise independently

Complications

Chest infections are one of the most common complications after suffering a chest injury.

Other less common complications include:

- Pneumothorax (air in the space surrounding the lung)
- Haemothorax (blood in the space surrounding the lung)
- Surgical emphysema (air trapped under the skin)
- Lung contusion (bruise or bleeding of your lung tissue)
- Abdominal injuries (liver, spleen and kidney damage which may cause pain in your abdomen or back)

If you have air or blood in the space surrounding your lung you might need a chest drain.

What can I do to help myself?

- Take regular pain relief. This will allow you take a deep breath, cough more comfortably, mobilise and do the exercises prescribed by your physiotherapist.
- Ensure a good position, such as sitting out in a chair or upright in the bed. This will make it easier to carry out your exercises.
- Mobilise as soon as you are able. You may feel a little reluctant to move, however, we very much encourage general mobility.
- Smoking is best avoided. Smokers have a higher risk of developing complications such as chest infections after injury.

Breathing exercises and coughing

1. Sit in a comfortable position either in the chair or high up in bed with your chest and shoulders relaxed. Rest one hand on your stomach.



2. Breathe in slowly through your nose allowing your stomach to rise out gently as you breathe in. Then sigh out gently through your mouth.

Repeat abdominal breaths 4-6 times.

3. Now, take a long, slow breath in through your nose and, once your lungs are full, hold the air in for 2-3 seconds and then sigh out slowly through your mouth.

Repeat deep breaths 4-6 times.

4. Take a slow breath in and quickly force the air out from your open mouth as if to steam up a mirror or a pair of glasses. This is called a huff and helps move phlegm to the back of your throat where it can be cleared by coughing, if necessary.

This completes the cycle of breathing exercises and you should aim to repeat every hour throughout your waking day.

Pain

The chest wall moves continuously while we breathe. Following chest wall injury, deep breathing and coughing can become painful. It is natural to want to avoid this pain by staying still as much as possible.

If pain is limiting your ability to cough and take a deep breath you are more likely to develop a chest infection.

The doctors and nurses will ensure that you have adequate pain relief. It is also important to tell them if you feel your pain is not under control.