

## When to see your GP

- You should talk to your general practitioner (GP) regularly to ensure you have adequate pain relief as this will reduce your risk of complications.
- Even after following the advice in this leaflet, some people 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 temperature;
  - you start coughing up blood.
- If your job involves a lot of manual handling or lifting, it may be necessary 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 discuss these with your GP.
- If you have any further queries about your current injuries please contact your GP or ring 111 for advice.

## When to go to hospital

- Call 999 or urgently visit your Emergency Department if you experience the following symptoms:
  - ongoing or sudden worsening shortness of breath;
  - increasing chest pain;
  - a new pain which is not near your initial injury.

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Disclaimer: The information in this leaflet is for guidance purposes only and is in no way intended to replace professional clinical advice by a qualified practitioner.

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**NHS**

**Brighton and Sussex  
University Hospitals**  
NHS Trust

## Rib pain & chest injury Advice for patients



### Emergency Department

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## Overview

- This leaflet provides general advice only about **an injury** to your chest wall, including:
  - fractured ribs
  - fractured sternum (breastbone)
  - chest wall bruising.
- There are no specific treatments for rib/ sternum fractures and chest wall bruising and it is not always necessary to have an x-ray.
- 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 four to six weeks to heal and it is usual to still feel some discomfort after this time. Bruising can take between two to four weeks to heal.

## Complications

- **Chest infections** are one of the most common complications following a chest injury.
- This is because you may not be able to breath or cough effectively due to pain and also because you may be moving around less than usual.
- Symptoms of this include being feverish and producing discoloured sputum (coughing up green, yellow or brown sputum).
- **Pneumothorax** (air in the space around the lung may cause shortness of breath, increasing chest pain, or pain away from the injury site).
- Less common complications include:
  - Haemothorax (blood in the space around 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 may cause abdominal or back pain).

## General advice

- The most important thing you can do is to try to avoid developing a chest infection while your injury heals.

### Do

- Take regular pain relief. You need sufficient to 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.
- When coughing, you need to support your chest – you can support the painful area with a pillow, towel or your hand.
- Keep moving by doing light everyday activities that you can manage without making your pain worse.
- Keep an eye on your symptoms to ensure they are improving.
- Seek help with stopping smoking.

### Don't

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