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Chest and rib injuries

***Information for
patients and carers***

Accident and Emergency Department

About chest and rib injuries

Falls or blows to the chest can cause bruising or rib fractures. These painful conditions can get worse for the first 7 to 10 days. The pain then should settle but this may take 6 to 12 weeks.

Almost all your body movements affect the chest. Even when you breathe your rib cage moves, so you may be constantly aware of your injury.

How are rib injuries diagnosed?

Usually the diagnosis is made from what you tell the doctor or practitioner about what happened, plus the examination they give you.

Rib injuries are painful, particularly with movement, deep breaths or coughing. The injured area is tender when pressed.

Rib fractures may (but don't always) show on a chest X-ray. If a rib fracture is suspected, the main purpose of a chest X-ray is to look for complications rather than to diagnose the fracture itself. Therefore, if complications are not suspected and you're otherwise well you won't need an X-ray. The treatment of rib injury is the same with or without an X-ray.

What is the treatment for rib injuries?

The most important treatment is good pain relief.

The fracture or bruise usually heals in about 6 to 12 weeks. Good pain relief during this time will help you to breathe and cough properly. Simply putting up with the pain is not a good idea because it can lead to shallow breathing, lack of coughing and chest infections. Painkillers help to prevent these problems.

Good pain relief is especially important for people who are more likely to develop chest infections such as smokers and people with chronic chest conditions like COPD or heart failure.

What pain relief should I use?

It's important to take regular painkillers to reduce the pain and help you keep mobile.

Paracetamol and ibuprofen are effective painkillers if taken regularly. We don't routinely give you these as you can buy them over the counter at chemists and many other shops.

Please read the instructions on the packets carefully for the dosage.

Please also check if there are reasons why you might not be able to take these medications. Your family doctor or pharmacist can advise you.

Some people find that applying hot or cold packs can help ease the pain.

Heat

A hot bath/shower, hot water bottle or heat pack (wrapped in a towel) can help reduce pain. The heat should be comfortable and not burn your skin. You can apply the heat for 15 to 20 minutes.

Cold

Some people find cold beneficial. You can use ice, a cold pack or a bag of frozen peas (wrapped in a towel), applied for 20 to 30 minutes to the affected area. Remember that you can get an ice burn; it should not feel uncomfortable.

Breathing exercises

Do the exercises below regularly to help avoid any complications.

So you don't forget to do these we recommend you do Exercise 1 every hour on the hour and Exercise 2 every hour on the half hour while you are awake.

Exercise 1.

- Place your hand over the painful area on your chest
- Take a deep breath in
- Hold for ten seconds and blow out with your lips nearly closed
- Repeat 5 times each hour, while you're awake.

Exercise 2.

- Hold on to the bottom of your chest or wrap your arms around your chest to give yourself a big hug (whichever you find more supportive)
- Take a deep breath in
- Give two coughs (these may be very small at first but should get bigger and stronger as you heal and when your pain is under control)
- Repeat every hour while you're awake

General advice

Limit sports activities as they may be painful however, don't avoid altogether if you are well enough.

If you're a heavy smoker, cut down as this will help your breathing and general health but don't try to stop at present with your rib injury as this could lead to a chest infection. When your injury has healed, if you wish to stop contact your GP for advice.

Sleeping

You might find it uncomfortable and difficult to sleep at night. Try sleeping in a supported upright position at first to help with your breathing and pain. Use several pillows for support.

What are the complications of rib injuries?

Most rib injuries heal well with no problems. Complications can occur if internal organs are damaged by the sharp end of a broken rib.

Get urgent medical advice if you have any of these symptoms:

- Chest pain is getting worse and the painkillers are not helping
- Increased shortness of breath (unable to talk in sentences)
- Develop a productive cough (cough up thick, green coloured mucus and / or have a fever)
- Cough up blood
- Develop a crackling sensation (similar to bubble wrap) over the site of injury
- Abdominal pain

Contact telephone number

If you have any questions about your treatment, please telephone:

**Accident & Emergency Department
Aberdeen Royal Infirmary**

☎ 01224 553306 or 550506 ☎

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