

Emergency Department Online

CHEST WALL INJURIES

Information and advice for patients and carers

This leaflet provides important information about how to manage a minor chest wall injury (such as bruised or fractured ribs), what symptoms to expect, how to support your recovery at home, and when to seek further medical advice.

Understanding your injury

Chest wall injuries are common after falls, impacts (e.g., from sports or road traffic accidents), or heavy coughing. Most are minor and involve bruising or small rib fractures. While these injuries are often painful, they usually heal on their own with time and supportive care.

What to expect during recovery

Common Symptoms:

- Pain in the chest when breathing, coughing, or moving
- Tenderness, swelling or bruising around the injured area
- Discomfort when lying flat, especially during sleep
- Mild breathlessness due to shallow breathing caused by pain
- Fatigue or disrupted sleep due to ongoing discomfort

How Long Will It Last?

- Bruised ribs: Symptoms usually improve within 2–4 weeks
- Fractured ribs: Full recovery may take 4–6 weeks, sometimes longer
- Discomfort may worsen in the first few days before gradually improving
- It's common to experience some background pain during healing

Home care: How to support your recovery

1. Pain relief

- Take paracetamol and/or ibuprofen regularly to control pain
- Effective pain relief helps you move and breathe normally, which is essential for clearing your lungs and preventing chest infections
- Always follow dosage instructions and do not take more than the recommended dose
- Some patients such as asthmatics or those with kidney disease may not be able to take ibuprofen, check with your doctor or pharmacist first
- Prolonged use of anti-inflammatory medication such as ibuprofen can cause complications such as stomach pain and bleeding

2. Keep moving

- Gentle activities like short walks and light stretching reduce the risk of complications such as chest infections or blood clots
- Going for short walks is one of the most effective ways of deep breathing and clearing mucus
- Avoid bed rest for long periods, unless advised by your doctor

3. Practice deep breathing

- Take 5-10 deep breaths every hour while awake
- Breathe in slowly and deeply through your nose, allowing your chest to expand
- Breathe out gently through your mouth
- This helps expand your lungs and prevent chest infections

4. Huffing to help clear your lungs

- Take a deep breath in and then forcefully exhale through an open mouth, as if steaming up a mirror
- This helps clear mucus from your lungs
- Repeat this twice a day

5. Coughing techniques

- Cough when you need to—don't hold it in
- Use a pillow, towel, or your hand to support your chest while coughing to reduce pain

6. Sleep advice

- Try sleeping in a slightly upright position using extra pillows to reduce pressure on your chest
- Avoid sleeping flat on your back if it increases discomfort

7. Avoid smoking

- Smoking delays healing and increases the risk of lung infections
- Help to quit is available at: www.nhs.uk/live-well/quit-smoking

8. Avoid strenuous activity

- Refrain from heavy lifting, contact sports, or activities that strain your upper body for at least 4–6 weeks, or until the pain has completely settled

9. Do not strap or bind the chest

- Chest strapping can restrict breathing and increase the risk of chest infections
- Allow your chest to move naturally as you breathe

Exercises to support recovery

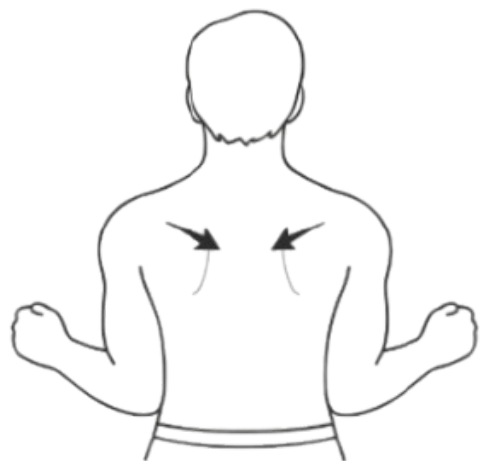
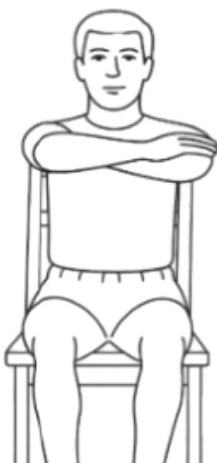
These can be attempted when your pain is more under control, not immediately after the injury

1. Upper body rotation

- Sit upright with arms folded across your chest
- Slowly rotate your upper body to the left, then to the right
- Move within a comfortable range
- Hold for 1-2 seconds
- Repeat 10 times each side

2. Shoulder blade squeezes

- Sit or stand upright
- Gently squeeze your shoulder blades together
- Hold for 1–2 seconds, then release
- Repeat 10 times



Returning to work and daily activities

- Return to light activities as soon as you're comfortable
- Most people can return to work when pain is manageable, especially for desk-based roles
- If your job involves physical work, lifting, or manual labour, speak to your GP or occupational health about a phased return
- Avoid contact sports or vigorous exercise until you're completely pain-free

When to seek medical attention

Please see your GP if you experience:

- Signs of a chest infection such as a cough, fever or shortness of breath
- A change in the colour of your sputum (for example if it goes from clear to green or brown)
- Coughing up blood
- Persistent pain that lasts longer than 6 weeks without improvement

Return to the emergency department if you experience:

- Sudden or worsening shortness of breath
- Chest pain that is spreading or not related to the original injury
- Feeling very unwell with a fever, cough or shortness of breath
- Swelling under the skin (a bubbly or crackling sensation—may indicate air leakage under the skin)
- New pain in your back or abdomen

