

Chest injury

Information for patients

This leaflet can be made available in other formats including large print, CD and Braille and in languages other than English, upon request.

This leaflet is for patients with non-severe chest injuries who do not require hospital admission.

It does not cover severe or multiple injuries where inpatient treatment is needed.

What are the causes of a chest wall injury?

The most common cause of chest injuries are:

- fractured ribs.
- sprained inter-costal muscles (the muscles between and supporting the ribs).
- fractured sternum (breast bone).
- chest wall bruising.
- muscular sprains.

Will I be in pain?

Injuries to the chest wall can be very painful. **Due to the movement of your chest wall deep breathing and coughing will hurt but are an important part in making a full recovery.**

Chest wall injuries normally take weeks to get better, for example, a patient with 1 broken rib can expect to be in pain for 3 weeks and to be in discomfort for several more weeks. If more than 1 rib is injured your recovery may take longer.

How are chest wall injuries diagnosed?

The diagnosis is usually made from the history (details) you give the doctor and the examination.

A chest x-ray is often not required.

Rib fractures may (but do not 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 the fracture itself.

If complications are not suspected and you are otherwise well **you may not need an x-ray**. X-rays are not used unless they are necessary, this is due to the radiation used.

Rib injuries are treated in the same way even if the ribs are broken or just bruised.

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What treatment will I receive?

The most important treatment is to have good pain relief.

Good pain relief helps you to breathe and cough properly. Simply 'putting up with' the pain is not a good idea as it can lead to shallow breathing, lack of coughing and chest infections. Taking painkillers can help to prevent these problems. You should also follow the instructions provided in the leaflet supplied with your tablets.

Effective and safe pain relief is important for people who are more likely to get chest infections, for example, people who smoke and those with persistent (chronic) chest conditions such as Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD) or heart failure.

How can I help myself?

You can help to control the pain by:

- taking over-the counter painkillers regularly, such as, paracetamol and ibuprofen. You should also follow the instructions provided in the leaflet supplied with your tablets.
- taking any painkillers prescribed by your doctor.
- placing a cold compress, for example, a bag of frozen peas wrapped in a tea towel, over the tender area of your chest to reduce the pain. This may help in the first 48 hours after the injury.
You should:
 - repeat every 2 - 3 hours.
 - **not** put ice directly against your skin.
 - **not** use the compress for more than 20 minutes at a time.
- supporting the sore part of your chest if you need to cough.
- doing breathing exercises. Try to breathe deeply. You should try to take 10 deep breaths every hour during the day to let your lungs inflate fully. This can help to prevent infection.
- having short periods of rest in between periods of gentle activity.

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What should I do?

You should:

- **not** wrap a bandage tightly round your chest. Although this may help the pain, it will stop your lungs from expanding and can lead to pneumonia (a severe chest infection).
- **not** stay in bed.
- **not** smoke.
- **not** lift, carry or push anything as these activities may make your pain worse.

When can I return to work?

This will depend on the type of job you have and how severe your injury is. You may need to take time off work. You will need to get a 'self-cert' form from your employer for the first 7 days. If you need longer than 7 days you will need to see your GP.

When should I seek further help?

Most chest wall injuries heal without any problems.

If you have:

- shortness of breath
- increasing chest pain even though you are taking regular painkillers
- pain in your shoulder or abdomen
- a cough or are coughing up blood stained sputum
- a temperature higher than 38°C (100.4°F)

you should contact your GP for further advice.

Contact numbers

If you have any worries or concerns you should contact your GP during normal surgery hours. Outside surgery hours, you should contact your GP's surgery for the Out of Hours Service number.

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Further information is available from:

NHS Choices

telephone: 111 (when it is less urgent than 999)

Calls to this number are free from landlines and mobile phones
or via the website at www.nhs.uk

Information used in the development of this leaflet

www.patient.info/health/care-of-rib-injuries accessed 29.09.15

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This leaflet has been produced in partnership with patients and carers. All patient leaflets are regularly reviewed, and any suggestions you have as to how it may be improved are extremely valuable. Please write to the Quality Assurance Team, University Hospital of North Tees or email: patientinformation@nth.nhs.uk

Comments, Concerns, Compliments or Complaints

We are continually trying to improve the services we provide.

We want to know what we're doing well or if there's anything which we can improve, that's why the Patient Experience Team is here to help.

Our Patient Experience Team is here to try to resolve your concerns as quickly as possible. If you would like to contact or request a copy of our PET leaflet, please contact:

telephone: 01642 624719
Monday – Friday, 9.00 am – 4.00 pm
Messages can be left on the answering machine and will be picked up throughout the day.

freephone: 0800 092 0084
Mobile: (can use text): 0779 506 1883
Email: patientexperience@nth.nhs.uk

Out of hours if you wish to speak to a senior member of Trust staff, please contact the hospital switchboard who will bleep the appropriate person.

telephone: 01642 617617
24 hours a day, 7 days a week

The Patient Experience Team is available to discuss your concerns in person Monday – Friday, 1.30 pm – 4.30 pm. The office is based on the ground floor at the University Hospital of North Tees.

Data Protection and use of patient information

The Trust has developed a Data Protection Policy in accordance with the Data Protection Act 1988 and the Freedom of Information Act 2000. All of our staff respect this policy and confidentiality is adhered to at all times. If you require further information please contact the Information Governance Team.

telephone: 01642 833551 or email: information.governance@nth.nhs.uk

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