

Fractured ribs

WHAT ARE FRACTURED RIBS?

Rib fractures (also known as 'broken' ribs) are one of the most common injuries to the chest. Ribs usually fracture (break or crack) at the point of impact or towards the back where they are weakest. Typically, you will have pain on deep breathing and coughing and it will be tender over one or more ribs. It may also feel hard to breathe.

X-rays may not always show broken ribs but are useful to check for damage to other structures. Depending on where the ribs are broken, there is potential for injury to other organs such as the spleen, liver, kidney or lungs. Your doctor or healthcare practitioner will assess you to exclude this.

WHAT TO EXPECT

- Pain may get worse for a week and last for up to eight weeks.
- If you are discharged from the emergency department or urgent care centre it is important that you understand the information your doctor gives you about pain relief medications.
- If you are unsure about how or when to take your medications, check with your pharmacist or doctor.
- Older people, smokers, those with lung disease and people with multiple rib fractures are more at risk of developing complications such as pneumonia (a chest infection).

TIPS TO HELP YOUR RECOVERY

The most important thing is to get your pain under control.

- Take your pain medications as prescribed by your doctor. If you have any questions, speak with your local doctor or pharmacist.

- The medications should relieve your pain so you are able to take big breaths, cough and mobilise (walk and transfer out of bed and chairs). This allows your lungs to expand and avoids complications of fractured ribs (such as an infection).
- Stay active by going for walks and staying out of bed during the day. This will open up the air sacs in your lungs, help you clear any phlegm (mucus) you may have and reduce your risk of developing lung complications such as a chest infection.
- Holding a rolled towel or pillow firmly against the painful site where your rib fractures are when you need to cough can help to reduce the pain and increase the strength of your cough.
- Strenuous activities such as heavy lifting should be avoided for the first three to four weeks, after which you can begin these activities as pain allows.
- If the pain is increasing you may be doing too much. Talk to your doctor or healthcare professional about this.
- It is best to avoid contact sports for at least six weeks, unless otherwise advised by your doctor or healthcare professional.

FOLLOW-UP TREATMENT

Attend any follow-up appointments as directed by your treating healthcare professional.

If you are having difficulty clearing your phlegm or are at high risk of lung complications, you may be referred to a physiotherapist.

See your local doctor if you have any concerns, uncontrolled or increasing pain, breathing problems, fever or develop a cough with phlegm. Return to the emergency department or urgent

care centre if you get increasing shortness of breath or a fever with chills or shakes.

Seeking help

In a medical emergency call an ambulance – dial triple zero (000).

Contact your local doctor, hospital or healthcare professional promptly if you have:

- a fever
- an uncontrollable cough
- abdominal pain
- trouble breathing
- coughing up thick or discoloured phlegm.

For health advice from a registered nurse you can call NURSE-ON-CALL 24 hours a day on 1300 60 60 24 for the cost of a local call from anywhere in Victoria.*

NURSE-ON-CALL provides access to interpreting services for callers not confident with English.

* Calls from mobiles may be charged at a higher rate.

WANT TO KNOW MORE?

- Ask your local doctor or healthcare professional.
- Visit the Better Health Channel at www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au.

This fact sheet has been adapted from the fact sheet of the same name by Emergency Care Institute NSW.

To receive this publication in an accessible format phone 9096 7770, using the National Relay Service 13 36 77 if required, or email

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Disclaimer: This health information is for general education purposes only. Please consult with your doctor or other health professional to make sure this information is right for you.

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