

Chest trauma

Introduction

This leaflet explains what can cause chest trauma and chest wall damage. It also provides some advice to help your recovery.

What is chest trauma?

Chest trauma is a common injury following a blow to the chest or falling heavily onto your chest. This can include broken ribs which usually heal without any problems.

Severe pain in the chest which is made worse by coughing, laughing or deep breathing is very common. You may need to take pain relief to allow you to deep breathe, cough and move around comfortably.

Managing your recovery

- Control your pain by taking good pain relief and using heat packs.
- It is important to breathe properly so we recommend you follow the breathing exercises towards the end of this leaflet.
- You should also avoid sitting or resting in bed for long periods of time. During the day get up and walk a short distance every hour.
- Stop smoking.

Pain management

Pain may last up to 8 weeks following your injury but will gradually improve. It is important to continue taking pain relief regularly. If you have not been advised about which pain relief to take please discuss with your GP or pharmacist.

Many medicines cause constipation so it is important to eat plenty of fresh fruit, vegetables and drink plenty of fluids to prevent this.

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Breathing exercises

After trauma to your chest you may find that the pain makes it difficult to breathe deeply. The following exercises will help you to regain your normal breathing pattern.

Relaxed breathing - sit in a comfortable position and place one hand on your abdomen. Breathe in gently and slowly through your nose, and then out through your nose or mouth.

You should feel your abdomen rise while your chest remains mostly still. Keep your shoulders relaxed.

Deep breathing - take as big a breath as you are comfortably able, keeping your shoulders relaxed - repeat 3 or 4 times. Repeat relaxed breathing.

If you find that you have excess phlegm, the breathing exercises will help you to clear it. You can also add huffing.

Huffing - 1 or 2 huffs (imagine you need to steam up your glasses) or cough. Repeat relaxed breathing.

Continue this sequence until the phlegm is cleared. If you find it is painful to cough, try supporting the painful area with your hands, a towel or a pillow.

Applying heat

Heat such as a covered hot water bottle or a heat pack applied to the painful area may help you feel more comfortable.

- Do not apply heat over open wounds or bleeding skin.
- Avoid applying heat over irritated skin or skin conditions such as dermatitis or eczema.
- When using heat you should feel comfortable warmth only. Avoid overheating the skin.
- Wrap the hot water bottle or hot pack in a towel(s) to avoid the risk of burning the skin and ensuring a comfortable heat.
- Do not apply the heat for longer than 20 minutes.

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Concerns

Please contact your GP or NHS 111 for advice if:

- your pain suddenly increases and you are having difficulty breathing.
- your chest feels tight.
- you have an uncontrollable cough.
- you cough up blood.
- you cough up thick dirty phlegm.
- you have a high temperature.
- you feel generally unwell.
- you have an increased pain in your chest which stops you from deep breathing or coughing.

Returning to normal activity

Strenuous activities and lifting should be avoided for the first 3 to 4 weeks following a rib fracture.

After this time you may take part in physical exercise such as swimming and cycling as your pain allows. You may need to adapt your activity.

Contact sports, such as football or rugby should not be attempted for 6 weeks. This is to avoid possible further damage.

Pacing yourself

This means doing a steady amount of exercise or activity every day.

Set time limits for the activity you have chosen. Keep to your time limits. Do not try to overdo your exercises when you are having a good day.

Gradually increase the amount of time you spend on your activity.

Contact information

For advice contact your GP or:

NHS 111

Tel: 111

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Further information

NHS Choices

www.nhs.uk/conditions/broken-or-bruised-ribs/

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