Rib fracture

This fact sheet is for people who have presented to the emergency department with this condition.

This fact sheet provides general information. If you have specific concerns, speak to your healthcare professional for further information and advice.

What is a rib fracture?

- Rib fractures are one of the most common injuries to the chest.
- Ribs will usually fracture at the point of impact or towards the back, where they are weakest. Typically, this causes pain on deep breathing and coughing, and tenderness over one or more ribs.
- Chest X-rays may not show the broken rib but are useful to check for underlying lung injury.

- There is potential for underlying organ injury when ribs are fractured; your doctor or health practitioner will assess you to exclude this.

Treatment

The most important thing is to get any pain under control. Breathing exercises will not be effective unless your pain is controlled.

Pain relief

- Take your pain medications regularly, as prescribed by your doctor.
- Continue to speak with your local doctor or pharmacist about maintaining your pain relief.
- The medications should provide a good and constant level of pain control.

Activities to avoid

- Strenuous activities should be avoided for the first 3-4 weeks, after which physical activity may be recommenced as pain allows.
- If the pain is increasing, you may be doing too much. Talk to your doctor or physiotherapist about this.
- Contact sports should be avoided for at least 6 weeks to prevent further damage, unless otherwise advised by your doctor or physiotherapist.

Breathing exercises

- Try holding a cushion firmly against the painful site when you huff and cough to decrease the pain.
- Sit out of bed and keep moving as much as you feel comfortable. This will decrease the risk of developing lung complications.
- Complete deep breathing and coughing exercises as prescribed.

What to expect

Follow-up physiotherapy appointments, as directed by your doctor.

Older people, smokers, those with lung disease and people with multiple rib fractures are more at risk of developing complications such as pneumonia.

See your local doctor if you have:

- any concerns
- uncontrolled or increasing pain
- breathing problems
- a fever
- developed a cough with sputum.