

What problems should I look out for?

Please seek further medical advice from your GP if you experience any of the following:

- You cough up yellow or green sputum.
- You become unwell with a temperature.
- You cough up blood.

If you experience any of the following symptoms you should dial 999 or attend your nearest Emergency department immediately

- Ongoing or worsening shortness of breath.
- Increasing chest pain.
- Pain in your tummy or shoulder.

Reference sources

Broken or bruised ribs

<http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/rib-injuries/pages/introduction.aspx>

Care of Rib injuries

<http://patient.info/health/care-of-rib-injuries>

Contact details

If you have you any other questions or problems please contact us.

Accident & Emergency Department

Telephone: 01483 571122 **ext** 2206

or contact your own GP or phone 111

PALS and Advocacy contact details

Contact details of independent advocacy services can be provided by our Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) who are located on the right hand side as you enter the main reception area. PALS are also your first point of contact for health related issues, questions or concerns surrounding RSCH patient services.

Telephone: 01483 402757

Email: rsc-tr.pals@nhs.net

Opening hours: 9.00am–3.00pm
Monday to Friday

If you would like information documents in large print, on tape or in another language or form please contact PALS.

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Rib and chest injury

Accident & Emergency Department



Patient information leaflet

What are Rib/Chest injuries?

This term refers to fractured ribs or sternum, bruising of the ribs, muscles or the chest wall. These injuries normally occur when there is a force to the chest such as from a fall, assault or road accident. These can also be caused by the force of your own muscles e.g. coughing, straining or heavy sports. An injury is more likely if there is weakness of the ribs such as thinning of the bones or other disease. Rib/Chest injuries usually take around 4-6 weeks to heal, bruising may take less time, and it is usual to feel some discomfort after this time. Pain is one of the main problems following these types of injury and good painkillers are important so that you can breathe and cough easily while it heals, this will help to avoid a chest infection.

How can I tell if I've injured my ribs?

A broken or bruised rib will feel very painful. Ribs that are broken are painful, particularly with movement, deep breaths or coughing. They are also painful when pressed. You may also have some bruising or swelling to the chest wall. Broken or bruised ribs are often treated in the same way therefore it is not usually necessary to have an x-ray to determine what your exact injury is, the main purpose of an x-ray is to look for complications rather than to diagnose the fracture itself. The history and chest examination will determine if you need an x-ray.

What is the treatment for rib injuries?

- The most important treatment is to have good pain relief. Good pain relief helps you to cough properly, so that you do not shallow breathe. This and lack of coughing can lead to a chest infection. Effective and safe pain relief is especially important for people that are more prone to chest infection e.g. smokers and people with chronic chest conditions or heart failure. Three types of painkillers can be used: Over the counter medicine such as Paracetamol and Ibuprofen or strong painkillers may be prescribed for you such as codeine or dihydrocodeine. These should be taken regularly. Follow the dosage instructions on the packets or as directed by your healthcare professional.
- Holding an ice pack to your chest (i.e. frozen peas in a tea towel) regularly will help reduce pain and swelling in the first few days.
- Keep mobile e.g. walking. Walking around and moving your shoulders in light everyday activities can help with your breathing and clear mucus from your lungs. Do not stay lying down or still for long periods of time. It may help to sleep more upright for the first few nights.
- Carry out deep breathing exercises – take 10 slow deep breaths every hour letting your lungs fully inflate.
- Cough when you need to, you can support the painful area with a pillow or your hands.

- Avoid smoking, Seek help with stopping smoking. Visit [www.nhshealth.org.uk/stop smoking](http://www.nhshealth.org.uk/stop-smoking)
- Do not strap or wrap a bandage tightly around your chest as this will stop your lungs expanding properly
- Depending on your job and severity of injury you may need time off work especially if your work involves physical labour or heavy lifting.
- Avoid contact sports for six weeks.

Are there any complications?

Most injuries heal well with no problems; complications occur if internal organs are damaged by the sharp end of a broken rib.

- Chest Infection is one of the most common.

Less common:

- Pneumothorax (air in the space surrounding the lung may cause shortness of breath, increasing chest pain or pain not near the injury).
- Haemothorax (blood in the space surrounding the lung can cause shortness of breath and pain in the lower chest).
- Surgical emphysema (air trapped under the skin can cause a bubbly swollen area on the chest wall and may be linked to a pneumothorax).
- Abdominal Injuries (liver or spleen damage which may cause pain in your shoulder or back).