Understanding fractured ribs

Rib fractures are one of the most common injuries to the chest. They will usually fracture 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.

X-rays may not always show the broken rib but are useful to check for underlying organ injury. The findings may help to make the correct diagnosis.

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

Tips to help your recovery

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

- Take your pain relieving medications as prescribed by your doctor, and continue to speak with your local doctor or pharmacist about maintaining your pain relief. The medications should provide you with a good and constant level of pain relief which will avoid peaks of pain.

- Strenuous activities should be avoided for the first 3-4 weeks, after which you can commence physical activity as pain allows. If the pain is increasing you may be doing too much. Talk to your doctor or physiotherapist about this.

- Avoid contact sports for at least 6 weeks to prevent further damage, unless otherwise advised by your doctor or physiotherapist.

Know the Facts

- Pain may get worse for a week and last for up to eight weeks. If you are discharged from the emergency department it is important that you understand the information your doctor gives you about pain relief medications.

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

If you develop fever, an uncontrollable cough, abdominal pain, have trouble breathing or cough up thick or discoloured phlegm – contact your doctor or hospital immediately.
Fractured Ribs

Exercises to try

- 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.

Instructions:

Follow up treatment

- Physiotherapy follow up as directed by your Emergency Department doctor.
- See your local doctor if you have and concerns, uncontrolled or increasing pain, breathing problems or develop a cough with sputum.

Seeking help:

In a medical emergency go to your nearest emergency department or call 000.

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