Chest wall injuries
This leaflet is for patients who have sustained injuries to the chest wall. It offers information about symptoms you may experience while you recover, how to prevent complications and how you can assist in your own recovery. If you have any further questions or concerns, please speak to a doctor or nurse caring for you.

What is a chest wall injury?
Injuries to the chest wall include fractured ribs, fractured sternum (breastbone) and bruising to the lungs. They normally occur following a high impact trauma such as falling from a height, a road traffic accident or high impact sports.

What are the signs and symptoms of a chest wall injury?
Following an injury to the chest wall, you may experience pain when coughing, taking deep breaths and when laughing. It can also be uncomfortable to move in bed and walk. Although chest wall injuries can be painful, you can expect this discomfort to improve over a period of three to six weeks. This may take longer for more severe injuries.

What are the possible complications of a chest wall injury?
The chest wall moves continuously while we breathe. Following rib fractures, this movement becomes painful and can stop us from taking deep breaths, coughing or laughing. This in turn prevents us from clearing our natural lung secretions, which can build up and cause a chest infection.

Some people also experience pain and stiffness in the shoulder and spine. This is mainly the result of not moving as we usually would.

How is an injury to the chest wall treated?
When you are in hospital, you may require some oxygen to help your breathing. You should take painkillers to control your pain and enable you to move around.

Chest wall injuries are managed differently depending on the severity of the injury and the symptoms you are experiencing. While some people require a chest drain to release fluid, or surgery to fix broken ribs, most people find that their injury heals on its own over a period of weeks.

What can I do to help my recovery?
To reduce the risk of developing a chest infection there are numerous things you can do:

- Take deep breaths regularly throughout the day. Aim to take 10 deep breaths every hour.
- Do not suppress the need to cough or take cough-suppressing medicine – it is important to clear any phlegm that builds in your lungs.
- Take regular pain relief
- Support your ribs when you cough by hugging a pillow or rolled up towel into your chest.
- Do a steady amount of exercise or activity every day and gradually increase this until you have returned to your usual activities.
- Avoid spending prolonged periods of time in bed.
To reduce the risk of developing pain or stiffness in your shoulder or spine it is important that you continue to move around as usual, and that your pain is sufficiently controlled to allow this. During your admission at St. Georges you will have been provided with an exercise sheet. You should complete these exercises daily until you can move your arm and trunk fully. If you have not received a copy of the exercise sheet, please ask a member of staff involved in your care.

What should I look out for once I have left the hospital?
You should contact your GP if you:
- feel unwell
- develop a fever
- feel short of breath
- start coughing up yellow, green or blood-stained phlegm
- experience pain on the chest wall that persists after eight weeks
- experience heart palpitations.

Will I need to attend a follow-up appointment?
You will not require follow-up as standard, but you should contact your GP for a referral to your local physiotherapy service if:
- you have difficulty achieving full movement of your arms or spine
- you have pain in your chest, back or shoulder that does not settle after six to eight weeks
- you find it difficult to return to full work duties or hobbies
- breathlessness stops you from returning to previous levels of fitness.

Contact Us
If you have any questions or concerns about your chest wall injury, you can contact staff on your ward via St. George’s Hospital switchboard on 0208 672 1255. Alternatively, you can call the Trauma, Orthopaedics and Plastics department on 0208 725 0985.

For more information leaflets on conditions, procedures, treatments and services offered at our hospitals, please visit www.stgeorges.nhs.uk

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Additional services

Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS)
PALS can offer you on-the-spot advice and information when you have comments or concerns about our services or the care you have received. You can visit the PALS office between 9am and 5pm, Monday to Friday in the main corridor between Grosvenor and Lanesborough Wing (near the lift foyer).

Tel: 020 8725 2453  Email: pals@stgeorges.nhs.uk

NHS Choices
NHS Choices provides online information and guidance on all aspects of health and healthcare, to help you make decisions about your health.
Web: www.nhs.uk