Sternum (breast bone) fracture

This leaflet is for patients who have sustained a fracture to their sternum. 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 sternal fracture?
A sternal fracture is a break in your breast bone. This normally occurs following a high impact trauma such as falling from a height, a road traffic accident or high impact sports. As a result you may also have bruising to the underlying lung tissue or to your heart.

What are the signs and symptoms of a sternal fracture?
The sternum moves continuously with the ribcage when we breathe. Following a sternal fracture, this movement can become painful and can stop us from taking deep breaths, coughing or laughing. Due to the muscle attachments on your sternum you may also have some discomfort in your chest when moving your arms or lifting objects.

Sternal fractures can be painful but you can expect this discomfort to improve over a period of six to eight weeks. Recovery may take longer for more severe injuries which have required surgery to fix them.

What are the possible complications of a sternal fracture?
The pain and/or discomfort experienced following a sternal injury can discourage you from taking deep breaths, coughing or laughing, and this can prevent you from clearing your natural lung secretions. If the secretions begin to build up, this can cause a chest infection.

Following a sternal fracture, some people develop pain and stiffness in the shoulder and spine. This is mainly the result of not using your arms due to pain caused by the injury. It is important that you continue to use your arms, but you should avoid any heavy lifting or pushing for six to eight weeks. If you have had surgery on your fracture, your physiotherapist will advise you on a timeframe for returning to activities.

How is a sternal fracture treated?
Sternal fractures are managed differently depending on how the bone has broken and the symptoms you are experiencing. While some people require surgery, most people find that the fracture heals on its own over a period of weeks.

When you are in hospital, you may require some oxygen to help your breathing. You will also undergo tests to ensure your heart has not been damaged. You should take painkillers to control your pain and to enable you to move around/resume your normal activities.

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 chest wall when you cough.
• Alternate periods of rest with gentle activity over the next few weeks.

**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 sternal fracture, 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](http://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

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**Web:** [www.nhs.uk](http://www.nhs.uk)