

# Chest Wall Injuries: A Guide for Patients

This leaflet is for anybody who has sustained injuries to the chest wall. It tells you about symptoms you may experience while you recover, how to prevent complications and how you can aid your 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.

## Signs and symptoms

Following an injury to the chest wall people frequently 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 3-6 weeks. This may take longer for more severe injuries.

## Treatment

Chest wall injuries are managed differently depending on the severity of your injuries and the symptoms you are experiencing. While some people require surgery to fix broken ribs, or the use of drains, for most the injury heals on its own over a period of weeks. When you are in hospital, you may require some oxygen to help your breathing. You should take painkillers to control your pain and to enable you to move around.

## Possible complications

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. These secretions can build up and cause a chest infection. Some people also experience pain and stiffness in the shoulder and spine. This mainly results from not moving as we usually would, due to pain caused by the injury.

## What can I do to help my recovery?

To reduce the risk of developing a chest infection there are numerous things you can do.

These include:

- a) taking deep breaths regularly throughout the day - aim to take **ten deep breaths** every hour
- b) do not suppress the need to cough or take cough suppressing medicine- it is important to clear any phlegm that builds in your lungs.
- c) take regular pain relief.
- d) support your ribs when you cough by holding your hands over the painful area.

- e) do a steady amount of exercise or activity every day and gradually increase this until you have returned to your usual activities.
- f) 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 you continue to move around as usual and that your pain is sufficiently controlled to allow this. During your admission at St. Georges you might have been provided with an exercise sheet. You should complete these exercises daily, until you can move your arm and trunk fully.

## What happens after I have left hospital?

**You should contact your GP if you:**

- a) feel unwell
- b) develop a fever
- c) feel short of breath
- d) start coughing up yellow, green or blood stained phlegm
- e) experience pain on the chest wall that persists after eight weeks
- f) feel heart palpitations.

## Do I need follow- up physiotherapy?

You should contact your GP for a referral to your local physiotherapy service if:

- a) you have difficulty in achieving full movement of your arms or spine
- b) pain in your chest, back or shoulder does not settle after 6-8 weeks
- c) you find it difficult to return to full work duties or hobbies
- d) breathlessness stops you from returning to previous levels of fitness.

## Contact us

You can contact your ward via St. George's Hospital switchboard for any nursing or medical queries: **020 8672 1255**.

Trauma, Orthopaedics & Plastics Therapy Department  
5th Floor St. James' Wing, St. George's Hospital  
Tel: **020 8725 0985**

Web: <https://www.stgeorges.nhs.uk/service/therapies/trauma-and-orthopaedics-2/>

Twitter: @StGTraumaPTOT

**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 9.30am and 4.30pm, 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](mailto: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](http://www.nhs.uk)

## NHS 111

You can call 111 when you need medical help fast but it's not a 999 emergency. NHS 111 is available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. Calls are free from landlines and mobile phones.

**Tel:** 111



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