

Sternum (Breast Bone) Fracture: A Guide for Patients

This leaflet is for anybody who has sustained a fracture to their sternum. It tells you about symptoms you may experience while you recover and how to prevent complications. 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 breastbone. 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 your heart.

Signs and Symptoms

Sternal fractures can be painful but you can expect this discomfort to improve over a period of 6-8 weeks. This may take longer for more severe injuries which have required surgery to fix them.

The sternum moves continuously with the ribcage while we breathe. Following sternal fractures, this movement becomes 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.

Treatment

Sternal fractures are managed differently depending on how the bone has broken and the symptoms which you are experiencing. While some people require surgery, for most 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 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 and resume your normal activities.

Possible complications

Following sternum fractures, some people develop pain and stiffness in the shoulder and spine. This mainly results from not using your arms due to pain caused by the injury. It is important you continue to use your arms but avoid any heavy lifting or pushing for **6-8 weeks**. If you have had surgery on your fracture, your physiotherapist will advise you on a time frame for returning to normal activities.

The sternum moves continuously while we breathe. Following sternum 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.

What can I do to help my recovery?

To reduce the risk of developing an 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 as it is important to clear any phlegm that builds in your lungs.
- c) Take regular pain relief
- d) Support your chest wall with your hands when you cough
- e) Alternate periods of rest with gentle activity over the next few weeks.

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) You have 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 Details

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

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

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

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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