

## Rib Fractures

Ribs are bones in your chest that make a cage to protect the heart, lungs and other organs. There are twelve pairs of ribs. Each is joined at the back to your spine. The front ends of the ribs are linked to the sternum by cartilage. Your ribs need to be in one piece to be able to breathe normally and to get oxygen to the rest of your body. It is common to feel ribs moving if they are broken.

Simple rib fractures are rarely life-threatening, but may be a clue to more severe injuries like a collapsed lung. Rib fractures affect muscle movement, making it hard to breathe. Rib fractures can be very painful. You may have more pain when breathing deeply and coughing.

Pieces of broken ribs can go through your lungs. This can cause bleeding around the lung (hemothorax) or air that leaks around the lung (pneumothorax). If you develop blood or air around your lung, you may need a chest tube.

### Tests

- **ABG (arterial blood gas)/VGB (venous blood gas)** measurements can show if the lungs are able to get enough oxygen to the body.
- **Pulse oximeter** (“pulse ox”): A plastic clip or sticker placed on your finger or toe that tells us your oxygen level.
- **Chest x-rays and CT scans** can show rib fractures and other injuries.

### Treatment

The main treatment for rib fractures is pain relief. Pain medicine will not take this pain away fully. There is no brace to help rib fractures heal.

Clearing lung secretions is also important to prevent pneumonia. It is vital that you use your incentive spirometer or PEP (positive expiratory pressure) therapy. These treatments help you take deep breaths more easily. You will be asked to cough and deep breathe, even though it hurts. Extra oxygen can be given through your nose or by a face mask if needed.

### What to Expect at Home

- Rib fracture pain is worst and sharpest during the first 2 weeks after injury. It takes 6-8 weeks for your ribs to heal. The pain will get better during that time. Take pain medicine if needed and as prescribed.
- It may be hard to find a comfortable position for sleeping. Some people try to sleep in a chair or recliner or propped up in bed. With time you should be able to return to your preferred sleep positions.
- People often feel stiff in the morning. Try a hot shower or warm heating pad.
- Let pain be your guide as you return to normal activities. If you hurt a lot after doing something, it is probably too soon to be doing it. Listen to your body.

Your health care team may have given you this information as part of your care. If so, please use it and call if you have any questions. If this information was not given to you as part of your care, please check with your doctor. This is not medical advice. This is not to be used for diagnosis or treatment of any medical condition. Because each person's health needs are different, you should talk with your doctor or others on your health care team when using this information. If you have an emergency, please call 911. Copyright © 2/2023 University of Wisconsin Hospitals and Clinics Authority. All rights reserved. Produced by the Department of Nursing. HF#6894