

Rib Bruising and Fractures

Rib injuries normally refer to rib fractures, which is a break in one or more of your ribs. At times, the ribs aren't broken, but there is a severe bruising of the ribs or their surrounding muscles. Injuries to the ribs often occur when there is a strong force to the chest, such as from an accident, fall or sports injury. Injuries to the ribs can also be caused from the force of your own muscles. Severe straining, coughing or heavy sports have all been shown to cause injuries to the ribs. This is often more common in cases where the bones are already weak, such as from osteoporosis or other bone diseases.

Babies and children are far less likely to end up with fractured ribs because their bones are a lot more flexible. If there is a baby or young child with a fracture, it is important that you determine what caused the injury in the first place.

Many people get bone bruising, but mistake it for a fractured or "cracked" rib. Bruised ribs can be very painful, and you can have difficulty taking a deep breath, or get pain while coughing or sneezing. The only clear way to know if you have had a fracture is to X-ray the chest. But small cracks will not show up.

Rib Anatomy

The ribs protect and encase the chest cavity, which is where a number of vital organs are located. To ensure the protection of these organs, the rib cage is composed of long, curved individual bones with joints that connect to the spinal vertebrae. At the chest, multiple rib bones connect to the sternum by means of costal cartilage.

Even though they are fixed in position, the ribs do allow for some degree of movement, which helps to stabilize the chest when exhaling or inhaling. The rib cage is made up of 24 bones, each one is symmetrically aligned with one on the opposite side of the body. Out of all 24 ribs, the first seven pairs are called true because they are connected to the costal cartilage, whereas the other five sets don't.

The important point to note is that ribs connect to the front and the back, so a pain in the front can sometimes be felt as a pain in the upper back, and vice-versa.

Between the ribs are intercostal muscles, and these can become damaged during trauma.

How to Treat a Rib Injury or Fracture:

1. Painkillers

Breaks or bruises will often heal in about four weeks. During the healing process, you need to have good pain relief to allow you to cough and breathe properly. Trying to deal with the pain isn't advised, as it can lead to shallow breathing, chest infections and a lack of coughing. Painkillers will work to prevent these issues. Safe and effective pain relief is important for those who are prone to a chest infection.

Three different types of painkillers can easily be used:

- Non-steroidal anti-inflammatory medication
- Strong painkillers with codeine
- Paracetamol

2. Manual Therapy

Therapy can help with muscle damage to the intercostal muscles and other surrounding musculature. Rehab practitioners can also help with breathing exercises and rib stretches.

Tips:

- Avoid wrapping a bandage tightly around your chest. Even though this can help with pain, it prevents the lung from expanding and leads to pneumonia.
- Depending on what type of work you do and how severe the injury is, you might need to take time off work.
- If you suspect a rib fracture, you should go to hospital to have the chest and abdomen examined.
- Expect healing from bone bruising to the ribs to take up to 4 weeks. Fracture recovery can take anywhere upwards of 6 weeks.
- Wrapping ice over your chest or ribs can help with reducing pain and inflammation. Discuss with your RMP therapist the best course of action.