

Fractured ribs

What are fractured ribs?

Rib fractures (also known as 'broken' ribs) are one of the most common injuries to the chest. Ribs usually fracture (break or crack) at the point of impact or towards the back where they are weakest. Typically, you will have pain on deep breathing and coughing and it will be tender over one or more ribs. It may also feel hard to breathe.

Depending on where the ribs are broken, there is potential for injury to other organs such as the spleen, liver, kidney or lungs. Your doctor will assess you to exclude this. While in the emergency department tests may include x-rays, a CT scan, an electrocardiogram (commonly known as an ECG) and blood tests.

What to expect

- Pain may get worse during the first week and last for up to eight weeks altogether
- Older people, smokers, those with lung disease and people with multiple rib fractures are more at risk of developing complications such as pneumonia (a chest infection)
- If you are discharged from the emergency department it is important that you understand the information your doctor gives you about pain relief medications and when to attend a medical appointment for review

Tips to help your recovery

The most important thing is to get your pain under control.

- Take your pain medications as prescribed by your doctor. If you have any questions, contact Cabrini ED on 9805 1500, or attend for medical review at Cabrini ED, or ask your local doctor.
- The medications should relieve your pain so you are able to take big breaths, cough and mobilise (walk and transfer out of bed and chairs). This allows your lungs to expand and avoids complications of fractured ribs (such as an infection).
- Stay active by going for walks and staying out of bed during the day. This will open up the air sacs in your lungs, help you clear any phlegm (mucus) you may have and reduce your risk of developing lung complications such as a chest infection.
- Holding a rolled towel or pillow firmly against the painful site where your rib fractures are when you need to cough can help to reduce the pain and increase the strength of your cough

- Strenuous activities such as heavy lifting should be avoided for the first three to four weeks, after which you can begin these activities as pain allows
- It is best to avoid contact sports for at least six weeks, unless otherwise advised by your doctor
- If the pain is increasing you may be doing too much. Talk to your doctor about this, especially if you are not managing with activities of daily living, including showering, dressing, and walking around the house.

Follow-up treatment

Attend any follow-up appointments as recommended by your Cabrini doctor.

If you are having difficulty clearing your phlegm or are at high risk of lung complications, you may be referred to a physiotherapist. If daily activities are too difficult while recovering, you may benefit with support from inpatient, rehabilitation or respite care.

Return to the Cabrini ED if you have any concerns, uncontrolled or increasing pain, difficulty coping at home, breathing problems, fever or develop a cough with phlegm.

Seeking help

Cabrini Emergency Department (ED) is staffed by experienced emergency doctors and nurses 24 hours a day, 7 days per week. If you have any questions about your ED treatment our qualified ED staff can be contacted on **(03) 9508 1500** at any time. If you need to return to Cabrini ED for ongoing care we would be glad to take care of you again and if this occurs within a week of your initial consultation the doctor's fee will be bulk-billed.

You can also expect to receive a phone call or SMS message from one of our emergency nurses the day after you have been discharged. The nurse will be able to clarify any aspect of your diagnosis, treatment, or follow-up.

In a medical emergency return to Cabrini ED if it is safe to do so or go to the nearest hospital emergency department or call an ambulance – dial triple zero (000).

Return to Cabrini ED promptly if you have:

- A fever
- An uncontrollable cough

PATIENT INFORMATION

- Abdominal pain
- Trouble breathing
- Coughing up thick or discoloured phlegm
- Difficulty managing at home

Want to know more?

- Contact Cabrini ED on (03) 9508 1500
- Ask your local doctor or healthcare professional
- Visit the Better Health Channel at www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au