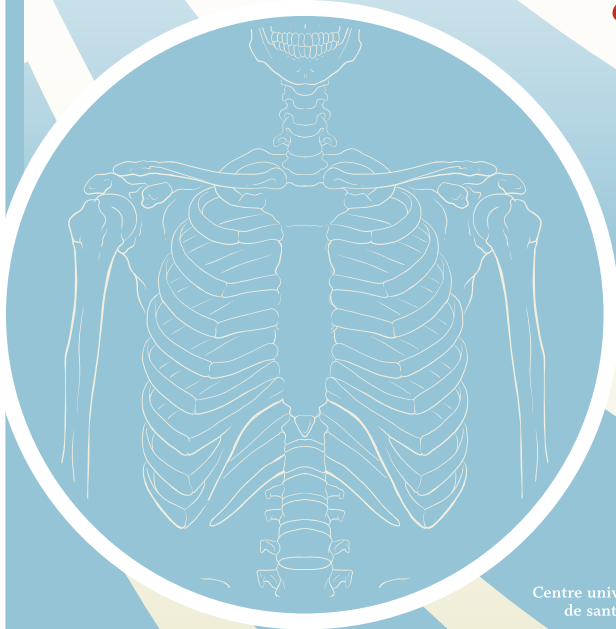


# Rib Fractures

*What you need to do after leaving the hospital*



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Patient Education Office

## **Acknowledgements**

This booklet was prepared by the Adult Trauma Program team at the Montreal General Hospital using the original version developed by students of the Ingram School of Nursing. It was created for trauma patients at the McGill University Health Centre (MUHC).

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We would like to thank the MUHC Patient Education Office for their support throughout the development of this material, including the writing, the design, layout, as well as for the creation of all the images.

We would also like to thank the MUHC Patient Education Committee for translation and printing support for this project.



### **IMPORTANT: PLEASE READ**

Information provided by this booklet is for educational purposes. It is not intended to replace the advice or instruction of a professional healthcare practitioner, or to substitute medical care. Contact a qualified healthcare practitioner if you have any questions concerning your care.

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This material is also available at:  
MUHC Patient Education Portal  
[muhcpatienteducation.ca](http://muhcpatienteducation.ca)

# General information

You have had one or multiple rib fracture (s). A rib fracture refers to a crack or a break in 1 or more of your rib bones. This is usually caused by a physical blow to your chest, as might happen during a car crash, a fall, sport activities or an assault.

It will take time for your ribs to heal. However, there are things you can do after you leave the hospital to help your recovery.

Research has shown that, by following the instructions we have included for you here (**e.g. taking your pain medications, doing regular breathing exercises and, moving around often**), you can recover smoothly and prevent other health problems (complications).

A chest infection (e.g. pneumonia) is one example of a complication. This can happen when there is a build-up of phlegm or fluid in your lungs.

Sometimes, the fractured rib(s) can injure your lung. If this is the case, your treatment team will place a special tube into your chest to drain blood or release any trapped air.

Before you leave the hospital:

- The tube in your chest will be removed.
- You will have a small bandage (dressing) over your wound. Follow the instructions received before discharge for the care.



# Pain Control

You may have pain or tenderness over your injured rib(s) when breathing, laughing, coughing, sneezing and moving. This pain could last for up to 12 weeks.

Treating your pain is important to help you recover more quickly and return to your normal activities.

- **Take the pain medications** prescribed by your doctor.
- **Do not wait until your pain is unbearable or very high before taking your medications.** It may take much longer for the pain to go away.
- You **should be comfortable enough** to do your breathing exercises, walk, and carry out your daily activities.
- **Always speak to your doctor, nurse, or pharmacist before changing your medication or adding medication to your regimen if:**
  - Your pain gets worse
  - Your pain is not well controlled, or
  - You notice a new health problem (ex: sleeping difficulty).



 **Always speak to your doctor, nurse, or pharmacist before changing or adding to your medication.**



## For your comfort:

- **Apply ice to where you feel pain.**  
You can do this for 10 to 20 minutes, 3 times a day, as you need. Place some ice in a re-sealable plastic bag. Then wrap this bag in a towel. Do not put the ice directly on your skin.
- Hold a pillow where you feel pain when coughing or taking deep breaths. This is called splinting and may help you experience less pain.
- **Sleep in whichever position is most comfortable even on the injured side.**
- To help get out of bed you can use more than one pillow to keep your head and shoulders raised.
  - Turn your whole body to the side that is most comfortable.
  - Bring your legs off the bed down to the floor and push your body up with your arms as needed.

**Never bandage (wrap) your chest or use a corset.** These will prevent you from breathing deeply. This can lead to more serious lung problems (complications).



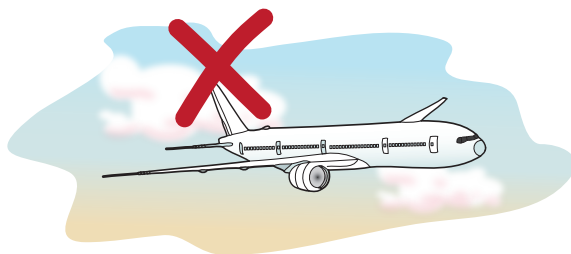
# Activities of Daily Living

Eat and drink as you normally would.

Stay active in the days and weeks after your rib fracture(s) (e.g. change position, stand-up, take a few short walks). This will help you heal.

## Avoid the following:

- **Strenuous or high-energy activities and lifting heavy objects** (e.g. lifting heavy grocery bags, furniture, etc.), for the first 2 to 4 weeks after your injury. After this, you can try more demanding activities slowly, as long you have no pain.
- **Contact sports** (e.g. soccer, rugby, martial arts, football, etc.) for 6 weeks (or as per your doctor's order) to prevent further damage to your ribs.
- **Taking a plane or scuba diving until you have spoken to your doctor if you had a tube in your chest.** This is important as there is increased risk for pneumothorax (collapsed lung from trapped air in your chest that could prevent you from breathing).



# Breathing Exercises

Breathing exercises are very important after a rib fracture. They will help you:

- Breathe better
- Improve how well your lungs work
- Help prevent other health problems (complications)

You may do either of these 2 methods of breathing exercises or alternate between each one. **They should be performed each hour while you are awake:**

## Method 1:

Sit on a chair or on the bed, with your feet on the floor.

1. Take 3 deep breaths in a row
2. Then breathe normally for a few breaths
3. Repeat this 5 to 10 times





## Method 2:

Use an incentive spirometer as described below:

1. Make sure the dial is at 200 cc/sec on the incentive spirometer to start.
2. Hold the device straight up in front of you.
3. Inhale normally. Relax and breathe out.
4. Close your lips tightly around the mouthpiece.
5. Inhale deeply (suck in like a straw) through your mouth. This deep breath will raise the ball in the incentive spirometer device. Keep the ball up in the incentive spirometer device for at least 1 to 2 seconds or longer if you are able.

**P.S.** When you can easily hold the ball for 1 to 2 seconds you can increase the number on the incentive spirometer dial to the next level.



6. When you feel you cannot breathe in any longer then breathe out.
7. Breathe normally for a few breaths.
8. Repeat steps 1 to 7 every hour (5 to 10 times) while you are awake.

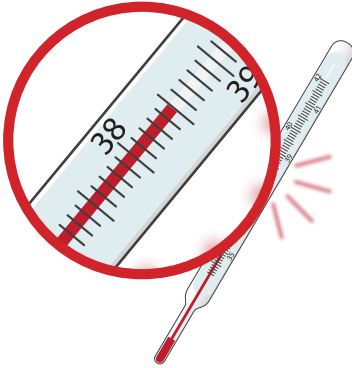
**P.S.** If you feel dizzy, stop and slow down your breathing.

9. If you continue to feel dizzy, notify a health care professional.

# When to contact your doctor or go to the Emergency Department

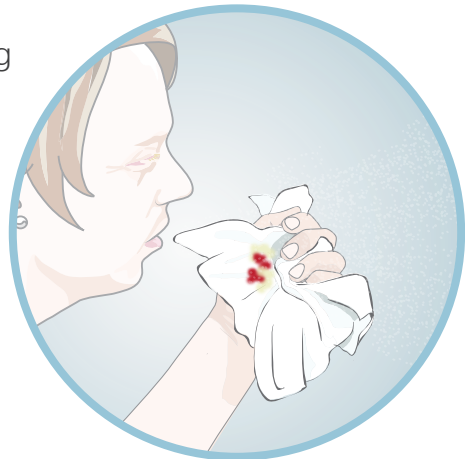
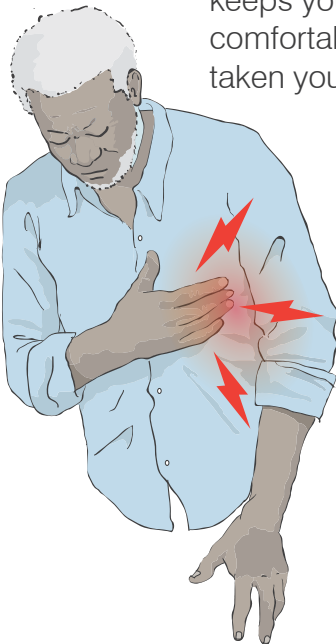
## Do not wait, if you:

- Develop a fever (temperature over 38.5°C or 101.3°F)



- Have trouble breathing, or are short of breath.

- Have chest pain that keeps you from breathing comfortably even after having taken your medications.



- Cough up blood, or yellow or green phlegm

# Contact us

If you have questions or concerns, call the:

## Assistant Nurse Manager

at the Montreal General Hospital  
Emergency Department, *if this is  
where you received care before you  
went home.*

- (514-934-1934 ext. 43610)

## Trauma Program Case Manager

at the Montreal General Hospital  
Trauma Program, *if you stayed on a  
hospital unit (e.g., 12th floor).*

- (514-934-1934 ext. 23734)



**HAVE A GOOD RECOVERY!**

## Notes

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