Rib Fractures

Ribs are bones that form the framework of the chest. They 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. This is tough, thick, and elastic. Your ribs need to be in one piece to be able to breathe normally.

Simple rib fractures are rarely life threatening; however, these breaks can be a clue to more severe internal damage. It is common to feel ribs moving after being broke.

Pain from rib fractures makes it hard to breathe. This may result in a collapsed lung or pneumonia.

Multiple rib fractures affect muscle movement which makes breathing hard to do. Your lungs are not as able to exchange carbon dioxide for oxygen. The tissues in your body need oxygen to work normally. Fragments of broken ribs can also go through your lungs and form blood around the lung (hemothorax) or air that leaks around the lung (pneumothorax).

Tests

- **ABG** (arterial blood gas) measurements can help 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 & CT Scans** are useful for finding rib fractures and other injuries.

Treatment

- Rib fractures can be very painful, but the pain gets better with time. Pain medicine will not take this pain fully away. You may have more pain when breathing deeply and coughing.
- The main treatment for rib fractures is pain relief and clearing lung secretions to prevent pneumonia. There is no brace to help rib fractures heal.
- **It is vital that you use your incentive spirometer or PEP (Positive Expiratory Pressure) therapy.** It helps to allow you to take deep breaths. You will be asked to cough and deep breathe, even though it hurts.
- Extra oxygen can be given though your nose or by a face mask if needed.