SYMPTOM

# Ribcage pain

Ribcage pain is discomfort felt around the ribs, chest wall, sides, or upper back.

**WHAT IT FEELS LIKE**
Sharp, aching, burning, tender, or pressure-like discomfort

**WHERE IT IS FELT**
Around the ribs, chest sides, back, or upper abdomen

**MOST COMMON CAUSES**
Muscle strain, bruised ribs, inflamed rib joints

**WHEN IT IS URGENT**
Sudden pain with breathlessness, fainting, or coughing blood

**USUALLY LASTS**
Days to weeks, depending on the injury or illness

**SEE A DOCTOR IF**
Pain persists, returns, or limits breathing or daily activity

## Overview

Ribcage pain is discomfort felt over or beneath the ribs. It may come from the muscles, bones, joints, or cartilage of the chest wall. It can also be "referred" pain, meaning it starts in an organ such as a lung or the gallbladder but is felt near the ribs.

Many cases follow an injury, strong coughing, exercise, or an awkward movement. These often improve with time and simple care. However, pain around the ribs can overlap with chest pain caused by heart or lung problems.

The location or intensity alone cannot confirm the cause. Pain that is tender when pressed or worse with movement often comes from the chest wall, but this does not completely rule out another problem.

## What it may feel or look like

Ribcage pain may affect one small spot, several ribs, or a wider area. It can occur on the front, side, or back of the chest.

You may notice:

Other symptoms can help narrow down the cause. These include cough, fever, shortness of breath, a skin rash, nausea, or pain linked to meals.

- Sharp pain when breathing deeply, coughing, sneezing, or twisting
- An ache that worsens after activity
- Tenderness when you press the area
- Bruising or swelling after an injury
- Burning, tingling, or sensitive skin
- Pain where the ribs join the breastbone
- A feeling of pressure or tightness rather than surface tenderness

## Common causes

Muscle strain is common after lifting, twisting, intense exercise, or repeated coughing. The muscles between the ribs, called intercostal muscles, may hurt with movement or deep breathing.

Bruised or fractured ribs can follow a fall, blow, sports injury, or severe coughing. A fracture is a crack in the bone. Both bruises and fractures may cause similar pain, and an X-ray is not always needed for a straightforward minor injury.

Costochondritis is inflammation where the ribs connect to cartilage near the breastbone. Cartilage is firm, flexible tissue. The pain is often tender to touch and may worsen with upper-body movement or deep breaths.

Other possible causes include:

Less commonly, pain in this area can come from a blood clot in a lung, a collapsed lung, or a heart problem. These causes usually need urgent assessment, especially when breathing, circulation, or general wellbeing is affected.

- Irritation of a joint in the upper back
- Shingles, which may begin with burning pain before a blistering rash appears
- Inflammation around a lung, known as pleurisy
- A chest infection, especially when pain occurs with cough or fever
- Gallbladder, stomach, kidney, or liver problems that refer pain to the ribs

## When to seek medical care

Call emergency services now if ribcage or chest pain:

Get urgent same-day medical help if you have pain with fever, worsening cough, new shortness of breath, or a fast heartbeat. You should also seek prompt care after a major injury, or if the chest looks misshapen.

After a rib injury, new abdominal or shoulder pain, increasing breathlessness, or rapidly worsening pain should be assessed urgently. These symptoms may indicate an injury beneath the ribs.

Arrange a routine appointment if the pain continues, repeatedly returns, disturbs sleep, or limits normal activity. Book an appointment if there was no clear injury, you have unexplained weight loss, or a painful blistering rash appears on one side of the chest.

- Feels heavy, crushing, squeezing, or pressure-like
- Spreads to an arm, shoulder, jaw, neck, or back
- Occurs with severe breathlessness, fainting, confusion, or blue-grey lips
- Is accompanied by sweating, nausea, or a sense of severe weakness
- Starts suddenly with difficulty breathing or coughing up blood

## How the cause is found

A healthcare professional will ask when the pain began and whether it followed an injury, cough, exercise, or illness. They may ask what makes it better or worse and whether you have breathing, digestive, or skin symptoms.

The examination may include checking the tender area, listening to your heart and lungs, and looking for bruising, swelling, or a rash. Your breathing rate, oxygen level, pulse, and temperature may also be checked.

Tests are chosen according to your symptoms rather than used routinely. They may include a chest X-ray, an electrocardiogram to measure the heart's electrical activity, blood tests, or other imaging. Minor rib fractures may not show clearly on an X-ray, but treatment is often based on symptoms unless complications are suspected.

## Treatment and self-care

Treatment depends on the cause. A minor muscle strain or rib injury often improves with

activity changes and pain relief. Infections, shingles, heart conditions, and lung problems need different treatment.

For a minor injury, you can:

Do not tightly wrap or bind the ribs. Restricting chest movement can make it harder to breathe deeply.

Over-the-counter pain medicines may help, but they are not suitable for everyone. Check the label and ask a pharmacist or healthcare professional if you have other medical conditions, take regular medicines, or are unsure what is safe for you.

Avoid staying in bed for long periods. Seek medical advice if pain prevents deep breathing or coughing, since shallow breathing can increase the chance of a chest infection.

- Avoid movements that sharply increase the pain
- Use a wrapped cold pack for short periods during the first few days
- Continue gentle walking and normal movement as tolerated
- Take regular slow, deep breaths to keep the lungs expanding
- Support the painful area with a hand or pillow when coughing

## What to expect

A mild strain or bruise may settle over days to several weeks. Rib fractures commonly remain painful for several weeks because the ribs move with every breath. Improvement should be gradual, even if coughing, rolling in bed, or certain movements remain uncomfortable for a while.

Costochondritis may come and go before resolving. Pain caused by infection, shingles, or an internal organ follows a different course and depends on treatment of that condition.

Arrange follow-up if the pain is not improving as expected, becomes more frequent, or changes in character. New breathing problems, fever, fainting, or pressure-like chest pain should not wait for a routine appointment.

## Common questions

Can coughing cause ribcage pain?

Yes. Repeated or forceful coughing can strain the muscles between the ribs. Occasionally, severe coughing can contribute to a rib fracture, particularly when bones are fragile.

Does tenderness mean the pain is only muscular?

Not always. Tenderness and pain with movement make a chest-wall cause more likely, but they do not confirm it. Other symptoms and your overall health still matter.

Can rib pain happen without an injury?

Yes. Possible causes include costochondritis, coughing, infection, shingles, spinal or joint problems, and referred pain from an internal organ.

Should every painful rib be X-rayed?

No. Imaging may not change care for an uncomplicated minor rib injury. It is more useful when there was significant trauma or a complication is suspected.

## Sources

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