



University of North Carolina Wilmington  
Abrons Student Health Center

## INSTRUCTION SHEET: RIB FRACTURE

The Student Health Provider has diagnosed a fractured (broken) rib.

A broken rib is usually not a serious problem. However, it is *painful*. The pain of a broken rib is most severe the first week after injury; the pain gets better each week, but can last one to two months.

The main treatment of a broken rib is 1) rest, allowing the rib to heal, and 2) pain medication by mouth. Rib or chest binders were used in the past, but they are no longer felt to be the best treatment. Binders decrease pain, but result in shallow breathing, stagnation in the lungs, and an increased chance of infection.

Very rarely, a delayed problem with a fractured rib occurs: The broken ends of a rib can puncture and collapse the underlying lung. A sharp increase in pain and shortness of breath accompany a lung collapse; prompt treatment to re-inflate the lung is necessary.

### MEASURES YOU SHOULD TAKE TO HELP TREAT YOUR FRACTURED RIB:

1. **REST!** You must rest the injured area, giving your body time to heal. Rest and tincture of time are the most important aspects of treatment. If you do not rest, greater pain and delayed healing will result. In general, avoid strenuous activity such as lifting, pushing, and pulling. Your body tells you when an activity is irritating the broken rib by sending pain signals: Avoid any activity that causes pain. The level of activity that is tolerated will increase each week as the rib heals.
2. Pain medication by mouth helps, especially the first week. If the provider prescribes pain medication, take the medicine only as directed. Do not take the prescription medicine and perform dangerous activity such as driving, operating machinery, standing on a ladder, etc. Over-the-counter pain medications such as ibuprofen, acetaminophen (Tylenol), or naproxen may suffice during the day, depending on your pain threshold; these over-the-counter medicines may also suffice to relieve pain after the first few days or week.
3. **SHOULD YOU DEVELOP A SHARP INCREASE IN PAIN OR EXPERIENCE SHORTNESS OF BREATH, GO TO THE CLOSEST EMERGENCY DEPARTMENT AT ONCE.**
4. Make a follow-up appointment with your personal/referral doctor or return to the Student Health Center in the week or two after initial injury. Your provider can follow your progress and help you get back to normal activities as soon as possible.