



University of North Carolina Wilmington
Abrons Student Health Center

INSTRUCTION SHEET: RIB/CHEST BRUISE

The Student Health Provider has diagnosed a bruise of your chest/ribs.

Symptoms of bruised ribs include mild pain and tenderness-to-touch in the injured area. Soreness is often worse with movement of the body/arms, and sometimes with breathing. Symptoms are generally better within a day or two, and should be much improved if not gone within a week.

Severe pain, difficulty breathing, or shortness of breath *are not* expected symptoms of bruised ribs.

Keep in mind that, while a broken rib was not diagnosed today, it is still possible you have a “hidden” cracked rib. A broken rib and a bruise are often hard to tell apart for at least two reasons: 1) The only difference between a break and bruise on examining a patient is the *amount* of pain a patient has (more with a break), and 2) A break is often hard to see on X-rays (the ribs are thin, overlap on X-ray pictures, and the front portion of ribs is cartilage, which doesn’t show well on X-rays).

The length of time your pain lasts may better reveal whether you have a break or a bruise: Soreness with a bruise is usually gone or nearly gone within a week. Pain with a broken rib often takes a month or two to go away.

A bruise and a cracked rib are both treated in the same manner, with rest and medicine by mouth to control the pain if necessary.

MEASURES YOU SHOULD TAKE TO HELP TREAT YOUR BRUISED RIBS:

1. Rest the injured area, giving your body time to heal. Avoid activities such as heavy lifting, pushing, and pulling if they cause pain. Gradually increase your level of activity as the bruise heals.
2. Apply cold to the injured area off-and-on the first two days. Cold helps reduce pain and swelling. After two days, apply heat (tub soaks or warm wet washcloths) to help the bruise heal more quickly.
3. Over-the-counter pain medications can help relieve the discomfort of a bruised chest; acetaminophen (Tylenol), ibuprofen, or naproxen can be taken, depending on individual preference.
4. If stronger pain medication is prescribed, 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.
5. Make a follow-up appointment with your personal/referral doctor or return to the Student Health Center a week or two after injury. A provider can make sure you are getting better, obtain X-rays if necessary, and help you get back to normal activities as soon as possible.
6. **SHOULD YOU DEVELOP A SHARP INCREASE IN PAIN OR EXPERIENCE DEFINITE SHORTNESS OF BREATH, GO TO THE CLOSEST EMERGENCY DEPARTMENT.**