

Rib Fractures

What you should know

This handout explains what to expect after a rib fracture.

What is a rib fracture?

A rib fracture is a crack or break in one of the bones that protect your upper body. A break in the thick tissue (*cartilage*) that connects the ribs to the breastbone may also be called a *fractured rib*, even if the bone itself is not broken. The most common cause of a fractured rib is a direct blow to the chest, often from a car accident or a fall.

Coughing and Deep Breathing

While your fracture is healing, it is important to cough or take the deepest breath you can at least once an hour. Doing this keeps your lungs open and clear. Coughing and deep breathing can help prevent pneumonia or a partial collapse of the lung.

Nurses and other members of your healthcare team will measure how deeply you can breathe. This is done using a device called an *incentive spirometer* (IS). Your respiratory therapist will use your age and height to set your IS goal and your IS alert level, and will explain these numbers.

My IS goal is: _____

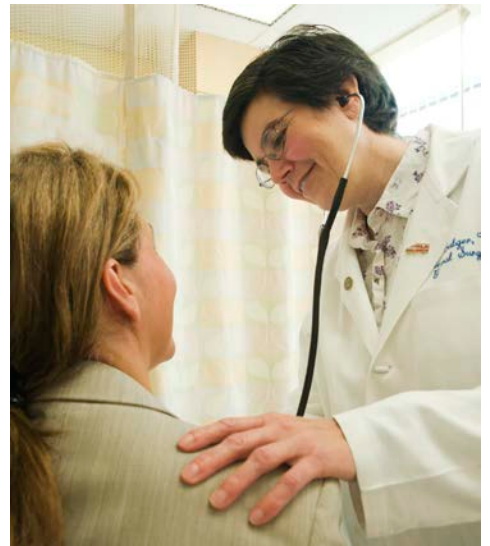
My IS alert level is: _____

Your healthcare team will help you breathe deeply, cough, and be as active as possible after your injury. They will also determine your “PIC” score.

What is a PIC score?

Your PIC score is based on your pain level and how well you are coughing and deep breathing:

- **P** = How much **pain** do you have?
- **I** = How deeply can you breathe using your **incentive spirometer**?
- **C** = How strongly can you **cough**?



Talk with your healthcare provider if you have any questions about your rib fracture or recovery.



Your nurse will show you how to use the incentive spirometer to exercise your lungs.

Your PIC score will be between 3 and 10. As your score goes higher, it means you are improving.

How to Use the IS

- Sit on the edge of your bed if you can, or sit up as far as you can in bed.
- Hold the IS in an upright position.
- Place the mouthpiece in your mouth and **seal your lips tightly around it.**
- **Breathe in slowly** and as deeply as possible. The yellow indicator disk should reach the blue outlined area.
- **Hold your breath as long as possible.** Then exhale slowly and allow the disk to fall to the bottom of the column.
- Rest for a few seconds. Repeat these steps at least 10 times every hour.

After you use the IS, position the yellow indicator tab on the left side of the device to show your best effort. Use the yellow tab as a goal to work toward during each slow deep breath.

One of the best times to cough is after you have done 10 deep breaths with your IS. After each set of 10 deep breaths, cough to be sure your lungs are clear. If you have an incision, place a pillow firmly against your incision to support it when you cough.

Pain Control

Rib fractures can be very painful. Nurses will ask you to rate your pain on a scale from 0 to 10, with 0 being no pain and 10 being a lot of pain.

Your doctors will order medicine to help with your pain. Pain medicine may be in the form of liquid or pills that you take by mouth, or it may be given through an intravenous (IV) tube or other tubes. You will receive more information about pain control.

Activity

Being out of bed and walking is very important for your recovery. When your doctor says it is OK, your nurses and therapists will help you to get out of bed.

If you have any questions, please ask your nurse, doctor, or respiratory therapist.

Questions?

Your questions are important. Talk with your nurse or other healthcare provider if you have questions or concerns.