

“Don’t breathe easy with injured ribs”

How many of you have ever had a broken, “cracked,” or bruised rib? Then, you can attest to the fact that it is a painful condition. It usually results from blunt force trauma –such as falling off a ladder cleaning out gutters or pruning trees (a very common story). This type of injury can also result from a fight, car accident, or being bucked off a horse (a common rodeo injury). Injured ribs are painful for several weeks, annoying, and can seriously disrupt your lifestyle for a period of time. They can also be dangerous, especially if you are older and frail, have COPD (chronic obstructive pulmonary disease), or bad heart disease such as CHF (congestive heart failure). Bruised and cracked ribs initially hurt just as much as broken ribs – but usually get better faster.

During trauma training in Savannah, we saw a lot of accidents on I-95. Many times, the victims were retiree “snowbirds” from up north who had been in Florida for the winter and were returning home in the spring. The words “...not hurt too badly, just a couple of broken ribs...” were not a comfort to us, but a warning to watch this patient very carefully. The reason why is when you break ribs, the pain is severe, as your ribs are part of the chest wall which moves with every breath you take. So, with every breath, especially a deep breath or cough, the pain can be quite intense. What tends to happen is that people avoid the pain by avoiding deep breathing or coughing, which lessens the pain of the injury. However, deep breathing and coughing are good exercise for your lungs, and they need that on a regular basis to stay clear, clean, and healthy. If you start to breathe shallow, using only the tops of your lungs – you will not clear them of secretions and mucus properly, and that can lead to pneumonia – which can start a “domino effect” of other health problems.

A blow to the chest which causes broken ribs can also result in a puncture of the lining around the lung, or the lung itself, which will cause lung collapse or “pneumothorax.” Even without this happening, not breathing deeply, developing pneumonia, and becoming very ill can make worse any conditions you already have, such as heart disease, kidney failure, diabetes, or existing lung disease. I have seen people with “....just a couple of broken ribs...” get deathly ill, come back to the hospital, wind up intubated in the ICU, start having multiple problems, and eventually succumb to their condition.

If you bruise, crack, or break rib(s) – you will need some help with pain control medicines, but what you have to do is breathe deep and cough several times a day. Hug a pillow to brace yourself, but do this without fail. The pain will get better in time, but avoid the potential downfalls of “breathing easy” with injured ribs.