

The Wellness Express

Jump on the train to good health

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Can Chiropractic Help Rib Cage Pain?

Presented by:

Pain in the rib cage area is a very common occurrence. Because the ribs articulate with both the back of the body (with the vertebrae) and the front (with the sternum), joint irritation can show up in either location. In addition, the rib cage surrounds a number of vital organs, so inflammation or disease in any of these organs can cause pain to the chest or the rib cage.

Where can rib cage pain come from?

1. Joint Pain

Since the rib creates a joint with the sternum, and two separate joints with the vertebrae, pain due to subluxations can be located in the front or back of the rib cage. It's usually localized pain, achy or sharp, painful to the touch and relieved by rest. There may be swelling over the area of the joint irritation.

Postural alterations are often contributing factors for rib subluxations. Rounded shoulders and tension in the postural muscles can push or pull the ribs out of their normal, relaxed position. Taking a deep breath often increases the pain, as the ribs expand with the lungs.

Chiropractic adjustments are particularly effective with this condition, and often a single trip to your chiropractor will decrease the rib pain significantly.

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2. Trauma

Accidents involving impact to the ribs can cause fractures, dislocations, contusions sprains or strains to the rib cage structure.

If you suffer an acute injury involving the rib cage, your chiropractor will first assess you. If he or she determines the injury is likely a rib fracture, your chiropractor may recommend you visit your local hospital for medical attention.

What if it's not a rib fracture? You will be advised to ice the injured area, rest for a couple of days, and wait for the immediate inflammation to subside. If the rib is subluxated in the front or back of the rib cage, your chiropractor will often be able to accurately reset the rib into its proper position. This will help decrease your pain and increase your rate of recovery.

3. Nerve Pain

There are nerves that travel between the ribs, called intercostal nerves, originating in your spine and crossing the entire circumference of your rib cage to end up at your sternum. Anything that can irritate these nerves can cause pain between the ribs. Two of the most common causes of nerve irritation are subluxed costovertebral joints and shingles - a viral infection of the nerves near the spine.

Exercise of the Week

Lunge Stretch

Difficulty: Easy

(Consult your chiropractor before doing this or any other exercise.)

Start: Kneeling beside a chair, bring one foot forward so front leg is bent to 90 degrees. Use chair to help keep balance.

Exercise: Keeping spine vertically straight, push hips forward and down. Keep front knee positioned over ankle. Stop when you feel a light pull in front of hip (of leg positioned behind you). Hold for 30-60 seconds. Switch sides, and repeat 2X per side.



One of the easiest ways to tell if you are experiencing an outbreak of shingles is to look for small blister-like bumps on the skin in the area of pain. For shingles, your physician may recommend anti-viral medication. However, if it's a rib subluxation that's irritating the costovertebral joint, your chiropractor can definitely help alleviate this problem.

4. Organ Pain

Multiple organs can be the source of rib cage pain, but the most common reason for chest pain is angina (heart pain). The pain caused by heart stress is typically located near the sternum, more to the left than right, and may also travel into the left arm, the jaw or the back. Pressure or heaviness over the rib cage may be the dominant symptom. Angina is not relieved by rest, but is aggravated by physical exertion. If you think you may be experiencing angina, or a heart-attack, call 911 immediately.



Another urgent medical emergency that can cause rib cage pain is a pulmonary embolism, triggered by a blood clot (thrombosis) originating in your leg. Be aware that a sudden shortness of breath and chest pain following a long trip by plane or car may be signs of this condition. It's important to call 911 right away.

Other sources of rib cage pain can include pneumonia or pleurisy in the lungs; stomach ulceration; heartburn or other esophageal conditions like cancer; gall bladder stones/inflammation.

Your chiropractor is trained similar to your medical doctor in the diagnosis of all disease. So it's important to share with your chiropractor as much information as possible related to the symptoms you are experiencing in the rib cage. This will help your chiropractor determine whether your problem can be helped with a chiropractic adjustment, or if it would best for you to be treated by a medical specialist.

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Quote of the Week

“Do you remember the things you were worrying about a year ago? How did they work out? Didn't you waste a lot of fruitless energy on account of most of them? Didn't most of them turn out all right after all?”

- Dale Carnegie

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This newsletter is written and designed by Mediadoc™ exclusively for its chiropractic clients.

Writer/Editor: David Coyne

Writer: Dr. Christian Guenette, DC

Design: Elena Zhukova

Photos: Fred Goldstein

