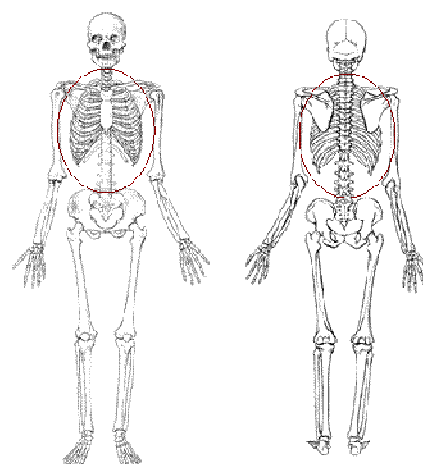


# **A Patient's Guide to Rib Joint Pain**



## Where are the rib joints?

Your rib cage is made up of twelve pairs of ribs. The ribs attach to the spine in the back, and to the breastbone in the front. The places where they attach are the rib joints. The ribs that we are referencing in this publication are the ribs in the back.



Ribs—Front View

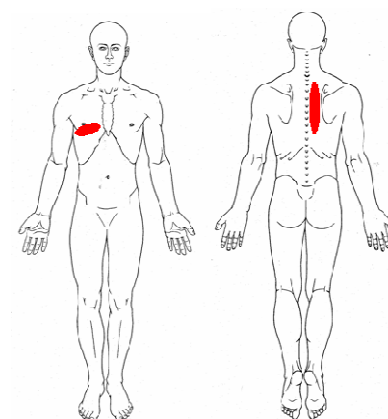
Ribs—Back View

## What is rib joint pain like and how does it start?

Usually you will feel pain from your rib joints in between the shoulder blades. It may be a burning pain or it could feel sharp and stabbing. You might also feel rib joint pain spreading to the front of your chest.

Rib joint pain may start all of a sudden, or develop slowly. Some people wake up in the morning and feel pain just by stretching or twisting “the wrong way”. Other people feel pain that gets stronger as the day goes on, and still others feel it slowly getting worse over a few weeks.

Taking a deep breath can make your rib pain worse. Sometimes it also increases when turning your head to look over one shoulder. You may feel a “knot” in your upper back that doesn’t relax when it is massaged. This kind of knot is actually a swollen rib joint, and the muscles around it are usually tense and tight.

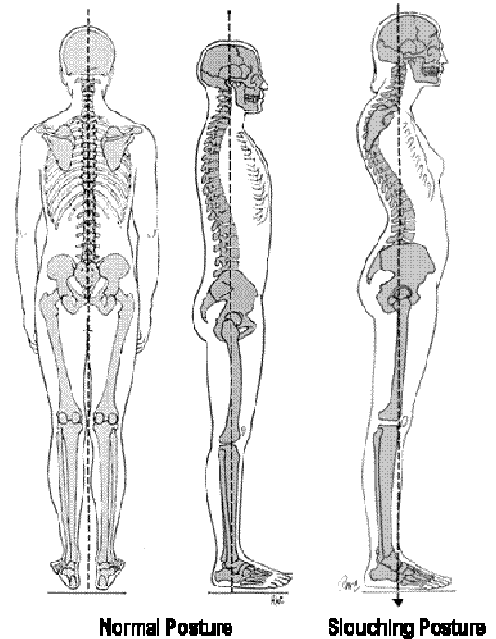


### What causes rib joint pain?

Rib joint pain is mostly caused by stressful postures. For example, if you tend to hold your head forward and round (or slouch) your shoulders, a lot of stress is placed on the rib joints of your upper and middle back. This stress causes your rib joints to swell and become painful. Once this happens, the muscles near your swollen rib joints tighten up in a spasm. Swelling and muscle spasms stop your rib joints from working correctly, which causes even more strain to the area.

Some other things that can affect the function of your rib joints and cause pain include:

- **Muscle imbalance**, such as tight chest muscles and weak muscles between your shoulder blades.
- **Improper posture while using a computer**, such as using a keyboard or mouse that is on the desktop, or reaching out for the mouse that is placed out of convenient reach. (Your keyboard and mouse should be used on a keyboard drawer, lower than desktop height.)
- **Reaching or working over your head a lot**, such as when you hang curtains or paint ceilings.
- **Sleeping in positions that cause strain**
- **Colds, asthma, and other conditions that make you cough or sneeze a lot**



### How will your diagnosis be made?

Most of the time, a physical exam will identify tender spots over swollen rib joints. Your posture will be examined, which is very important in finding the causes for rib joint pain. We will check for weakness of the muscles that hold your shoulder blades back and tightness of your chest muscles.

You will usually not need to have x-rays or MRIs at this time, unless you have had a serious injury.

### How do we know your diagnosis is correct?

Sometimes a bulging disc in your lower neck can cause pain that feels very similar to rib joint pain. We will perform several examination procedures and apply gentle pressure to areas in the neck and upper back tests to make sure that your pain is not coming from the joints, discs or nerves of your neck. Sometimes, people with rib joint pain think that it is coming from their heart, which must be ruled out.

### What are the goals of treatment?

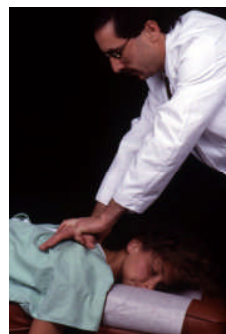
The goals of treatment are to:

- Relieve your pain
- Return your rib joints to their best mobility
- Get rid of joint swelling
- Relax muscle spasms
- Help lengthen tight muscles and strengthen weak muscles
- Correct bad posture
- Eliminate problems in your workplace that put strain on your joints

### What treatments are available?

We will combine some of these treatments:

- **Spinal manipulation** – In this hands-on treatment, the doctor will move your spinal joints to help you gain more mobility.
- **Therapy machines** – These treatments use electrical impulses or ultrasound waves to help relieve muscle tension and pain.



- **Cardiovascular exercises** – Mild aerobic exercise gives you better overall blood flow to your spine and body.

- **Stretches** – The doctor may prescribe stretches for you to do at home and in the doctor's office. We select these stretches to improve your overall spinal flexibility.

- **Home exercises** – You will be prescribed a set of exercises chosen especially to help you get better. Doing these exercises regularly is the most important thing you can do to get better and heal your back!

- **Soft tissue therapies** – Some massage treatments with hands and massage tools will help relax muscles and break up any scar tissue you may have.



### Will I need surgery?

Rib joint problems almost never need surgery to get better.

### **Will I need posture braces?**

No. In fact we recommend not using braces to attempt to improve your posture. These braces do assist in holding a person upright, but exposes them to the risk of making posture-supporting muscles even weaker.

### **Are there other treatments that I might want to try?**

*Leave it alone* – Many times, this type of pain will go away without treatment. The causes of the pain, such as bad posture, or strains from repeated motions, may still be there and may cause pain again in the future.

*Massage* – Relaxing the muscles around your swollen rib joint can help. Do not massage right over the swollen rib joint, because that might make your pain worse.

*Medications* – Over-the-counter pills such as Ibuprofen (Motrin, Advil) and Naprosyn (Aleve), called "non-steroidal anti-inflammatories" (NSAIDs) can help because they relieve swelling. Some people are helped by acetaminophen (Tylenol). These medicines may help to relieve your pain, but they will not fix the actual cause of your pain. Follow the directions carefully with all medicines.

*Injections* – Very rarely, a medical doctor may give shots of steroids or anesthetics into the affected joint to relief pain and swelling.

### What can I do to help heal and protect my own back?

*Change your desk and the ways you move.*

- If you work a lot on a computer, use keyboard drawer with a mouse platform.
- Avoid reaching out a lot to the mouse. Put the mouse on a lowered platform / drawer so that your elbow can stay bent when you use it.

*Get serious about good posture.*

- Learn what good posture feels like and looks like and learn to practice it.
- Pay special attention to lifting your breastbone and dropping your shoulder blades.

*Use a good quality neck (cervical) pillow.*

- Sleep with good support behind your neck. This is important for overall spine health.

*Stretch backwards at the end of the day.*

- If you spend time slouched forward during the day, it is important to reverse the effects of slouching at the end of the day. For example, lying backward over a therapy ball for a few minutes at the end of the day helps to stretch out the front of the chest and gently mobilize the upper spine.



**Chest stretch using exercise ball**

*Good News:* Most people with rib joint pain do get better. Do everything you can to help yourself, so you can get better faster and stay better.

### How long will it take for me to get better?

Most people with basic rib joint pain get better with a couple or a few treatments. How fast you get better depends on:

- How long you have had the pain
- How closely you are able to follow your recommended treatment plan
- Fixing the things in your home and work that put stress on your joints