

Costochondritis: What You Need to Know

What is costochondritis?

Costochondritis (koss-toe-con-DRY-tiss) is an inflammation in your rib cage where cartilage connects the ribs to the breastbone (sternum). It is also called chest wall pain or costosternal (koss-toe-STIR-null) syndrome. The main symptom is pain in the chest wall. The pain is often sharp, aching, or pressure-like. The pain gets worse with movement, deep breathing, or exercise. Pressing on the affected area of the rib can also cause pain.

What causes it?

It usually has no known cause, but it can happen after a severe coughing episode or during physical activity that involves the upper body.

When should I see a doctor?

Any patient with chest pain should see a doctor. Evaluation is especially important for persons older than 35 years and those with risk factors for heart disease, such as high cholesterol, high blood pressure, or diabetes.

How is it treated?

Costochondritis is not life threatening and will not cause any other conditions. Medicine can help with the pain. These include acetaminophen (one brand: Tylenol), nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (such as aspirin or ibuprofen [one brand: Advil]), or other pain relievers, as appropriate. Use of a heating pad may also help. Consider decreasing any activities that make the pain worse.

How long does it take to get better?

The pain can last from weeks to months, but it will heal on its own.

Where can I get more information?

Your family doctor

American Academy of Family Physicians

Web site: <http://familydoctor.org>

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This handout is provided to you by your family doctor and the American Academy of Family Physicians. Other health-related information is available from the AAFP online at <http://familydoctor.org>.

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