



# THE PAINFUL RIB

By Craig Osborne, Chiropractor © 2010

I spend a surprising amount of time treating rib problems. Specifically the joint between the rib and part of the vertebra called the transverse process (the costotransverse joint).

This joint effectively holds the ribs in place but allows for a small amount of movement and 'wriggling' as you breathe, twist, talk and exercise. If the joint becomes misaligned the nerve endings within the joint become agitated and lead to painful symptoms.

## WHAT CAUSES IT?

In my experience it's often due to twisting rotational movements which might either be forceful, or after sustained poor posture, or after highly repetitive movements. However it may also be due to a corrective shift because of low back subluxation patterns, so that area needs to be checked to try and limit recurrence.

## HOW CAN WE TELL IT'S A RIB?

Typically the painful spot is out to one side of the spine, it may often feel about the size of a 50c piece. Sometimes you may have felt a twinge at that spot that marked the start of your symptoms.

## OTHER SYMPTOMS

One thing that typifies a rib problem is the variability in the referral of pain. Sometimes pain radiates around the rib cage, sometimes straight through the chest, it might feel like heart pain, or may refer down an arm. If it's higher up the back it often severely restricts neck movement due to the pulling action of muscles on the affected rib joint during neck movement. Lower down it tends to refer around the rib cage,

## MIS-DIAGNOSIS?

In my experience, the problem is not

muscular spasm. There is often a lot of muscle spasm associated with the problem, but this is secondary to the misalignment of the joint. While massage during the acute stage can relieve some of the muscle spasm, it tends to be short-lived and doesn't resolve the problem. I always recommend a short course of adjustments and then soft tissue treatment.

## WHAT'S THE TREATMENT?

Adjust the joint to reestablish correct alignment, a massage a few days later can help to reduce residual muscle tension.

## HOW MANY TREATMENTS?

If caught early, the majority will settle with 2 treatments, sometimes a third. If it's been around for some time, it's much harder to predict. I've had patients who have suffered on and off for almost a year before seeking chiropractic treatment for it. In these situations the rib has taken some time to move and to finally settle down.

## POST TREATMENT EXERCISE?

In the first 24 hours keep active but don't try to test or overly stretch the affected area. Medication is sometimes useful to dull the pain. There are no specific exercises that I'm aware of that can prevent recurrence. There are some tricky rotational exercises that may reduce the risk of recurrence. Please ask if you would like to learn how to do them. Including them in my exercise regime seems to have helped how often I get rib problems.

## WILL IT HAPPEN AGAIN?

Quite honestly, hopefully not. Sometimes they recur in 2 weeks, or 2 months, or 1 year or never. At least now you know what it is, if it does happen again, my simple request is to make an appointment with me as soon as possible. The longer you wait the harder they are to treat. And now you know what they are, it's quite possible you can help someone else who may have one, and who really needs our help!

Cross section CT scan through the chest



