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Flail Chest: Clinical Management, Nursing Interventions, and Radiological Assessment

Elham Ahmad Mohammed Bokar [(1)] , Abdulaziz Fahad Alamrani [(2)] , Mariam Saud Alanazi [(3)] , Hanan Saud Alanazi [(4)] , Ahmad Talal Matar Almarshadi [(5)] , Rawan Ayidh Alqahtani [(6)] , Shahad Abdullah Alanazi [(7)] , Mohammed Omar Mohammed Sultan [(8)] , Nada Jaber Jaboor [(9)] , Shouq Ali Mohammed Assiri [(10)] , Huda Awad Alanazi [(11)] , Wadyah Ahmed Mohammed Yahya [(12)] , Fatma abdulaziz al eid [(13)]

(1) Primary Health Care Center Sabia,Ministry of Health, Saudi Arabia,
(2) King Fahad Specialist Hospital,Ministry of Health, Saudi Arabia,
(3) Yamama Health Center, Al Kharj,Ministry of Health, Saudi Arabia,
(4) Al Shamli Hospital,Ministry of Health, Saudi Arabia,
(5) Diriyah Hospital, Riyadh,Ministry of Health, Saudi Arabia,
(6) Riyadh Third Health Cluster – West Lubb Health Center,Ministry of Health, Saudi Arabia,
(7) Maternity and Children Hospital, Arar,Ministry of Health, Saudi Arabia,
(8) Sabya General Hospital, Jazan ,Ministry of Health, Saudi Arabia,
(9) Sabya General Hospital ,Ministry of Health, Saudi Arabia,
(10) King Salman Hospital – Riyadh First Health Cluster,Ministry of Health, Saudi Arabia,
(11) Al Khalidiyah Health Center,Ministry of Health, Saudi Arabia,
(12) Prince Mohammed bin Nasser Hospital, Jazan,Ministry of Health, Saudi Arabia,
(13) Dammam Medical Complex , Ministry of Health, Saudi Arabia

Abstract

Background: Flail chest is a severe thoracic injury defined by fractures of multiple ribs in at least two locations, resulting in paradoxical chest wall motion and impaired ventilation. It most commonly arises from high-energy blunt trauma and is frequently associated with pulmonary contusions and multisystem injuries.

Aim: This article aims to provide an integrated overview of the etiology, epidemiology, pathophysiology, clinical assessment, radiologic evaluation, and management strategies for flail chest to guide effective multidisciplinary care.

Methods: A comprehensive narrative review approach was used, synthesizing current trauma guidelines and contemporary evidence on diagnosis, imaging, respiratory support, analgesia, and surgical stabilization of rib fractures (SSRF).

Results: Findings indicate that flail chest significantly compromises respiratory mechanics, increases the risk of hypoxemia and pneumonia, and often necessitates hospitalization or mechanical ventilation. CT imaging provides the most accurate diagnosis. Optimal outcomes rely on multimodal analgesia, respiratory support, pulmonary hygiene, and selective early SSRF, which reduces ventilation duration, pneumonia rates, and hospital stay.

Conclusion: Early recognition and individualized, multidisciplinary management substantially improve outcomes. Surgical stabilization is particularly beneficial in severe cases with persistent instability or ventilatory dependence.

Keywords: Flail chest, rib fractures, pulmonary contusion, respiratory failure, surgical stabilization, trauma management.

Introduction

Flail chest represents a significant traumatic pathology of the thoracic cage, characterized by the fracture of multiple ribs at multiple sites, specifically involving three or more ribs fractured in at least two distinct locations [1]. This classic definition, however, does not encompass the full clinical spectrum of the condition, as contemporary clinical observations indicate that smaller chest wall segments comprising only one or two ribs may functionally behave as flail segments. Such segments, when exhibiting independent movement and contributing to the generation of negative intrapleural pressure during respiratory cycles, can produce the same pathophysiological consequences traditionally associated with larger flail patterns [1]. The Western Trauma Association, within its comprehensive rib fracture management algorithm, has characterized this anatomical disruption as a detached portion of the thoracic wall that demonstrates paradoxical inward motion during the inspiratory phase of respiration [1]. This characterization underscores the importance of understanding flail chest as fundamentally a clinical diagnosis rather than merely a radiological finding, given that not all patients presenting with the requisite fracture pattern necessarily manifest the classic clinical signs of paradoxical chest wall movement [1]. The pathophysiological consequences of flail chest extend beyond the immediate structural disruption to encompass profound alterations in normal respiratory mechanics. The paradoxical motion of the affected chest wall segment during inspiration creates

*Corresponding author e-mail: ebokar@moh.gov.sa (Elham Ahmad Mohammed Bokar).
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significant inefficiencies in ventilatory function, as the intrathoracic volume changes necessary for effective gas exchange are compromised by the inward displacement of the flail segment while the remainder of the thoracic cavity expands appropriately [1]. This mechanical disadvantage imposes a substantially greater physiological burden on specific patient populations, particularly those of advanced age and individuals with pre-existing chronic pulmonary disease, who possess limited respiratory reserve and diminished capacity to compensate for the increased work of breathing associated with this injury pattern [1]. Furthermore, the physiological impact of flail chest is frequently compounded by the mechanism of injury itself, as this condition most commonly arises from severe blunt thoracic trauma sustained during high-impact events such as motor vehicle collisions, significant falls from height, or direct crushing injuries to the thoracic cavity [1]. The traumatic forces sufficient to produce multiple rib fractures at multiple sites are typically substantial and often result in concomitant injuries to other organ systems, including pulmonary contusions, myocardial injury, great vessel disruption, and solid organ damage within the abdomen, all of which contribute to the overall complexity of clinical management and patient outcomes [1].

The clinical presentation and diagnostic approach to flail chest necessitate careful integration of radiographic findings with meticulous bedside observation. While advanced imaging modalities, particularly three-dimensional reconstruction computed tomography, may suggest the presence of a flail pattern through demonstration of multiple rib fractures at multiple sites, radiographic evidence alone remains insufficient for definitive diagnosis [1]. The confirmatory finding that establishes the diagnosis of flail chest remains the direct clinical observation of paradoxical chest wall movement during spontaneous respiration, wherein the affected segment moves inward during inspiration while the remainder of the thoracic wall expands outward, followed by outward bulging of the segment during expiration [1]. This clinical sign may be subtle in some patients, particularly those with well-developed thoracic musculature, significant chest wall edema, or those receiving positive pressure ventilation that splints the flail segment internally. Although the majority of documented cases involve unilateral chest wall involvement, bilateral flail segments can occur in the setting of extensive bilateral thoracic trauma, which substantially complicates respiratory mechanics and clinical management [1]. The presence of associated pain from multiple rib fractures, often severe and exacerbated by respiratory effort, further contributes to the clinical complexity by promoting shallow breathing patterns, atelectasis development, and impaired secretion clearance, thereby increasing the risk of secondary pulmonary complications including pneumonia and respiratory failure [1].

Etiology

Flail chest arises predominantly from high-energy thoracic trauma, sharing many risk factors with other severe traumatic injuries. Epidemiological data indicate that male sex and acute intoxication independently increase susceptibility to this condition. Motor vehicle collisions represent the most common cause, accounting for approximately 75% of flail chest cases associated with major trauma, whereas falls, particularly among elderly populations, contribute an additional 15% [1]. The mechanism of injury significantly influences the pattern of rib fractures. Direct high-impact forces to the thorax frequently result in multiple fractures along a single rib, creating mechanically unstable segments characteristic of flail chest. Conversely, rollover accidents and crush injuries more commonly produce single-point fractures, reducing the likelihood of developing a flail segment. Age and underlying skeletal integrity play critical roles in vulnerability. In pediatric populations, congenital or metabolic bone disorders, such as osteogenesis imperfecta, markedly increase susceptibility to thoracic fractures even from moderate trauma. In older adults, degenerative changes, including age-related stiffening of the chest wall and osteoporosis, predispose to multiple rib fractures under less severe trauma. The coexistence of chronic pulmonary disease in this demographic exacerbates risk, as compromised lung function magnifies the physiological impact of rib instability. These comorbidities not only predispose patients to injury but also complicate management, increasing the likelihood of respiratory insufficiency, prolonged hospitalization, and secondary complications such as pneumonia. Understanding the etiology of flail chest is essential for targeted prevention strategies, risk stratification, and the implementation of prompt clinical interventions to mitigate morbidity in high-risk populations [1].

Epidemiology

Flail chest represents a relatively uncommon but severe manifestation of thoracic trauma, with significant clinical implications. Data from the American Association for the Surgery of Trauma indicate that approximately 1% of the United States population experiences a major traumatic injury annually. Within this cohort, chest trauma occurs in 20% of cases and contributes to 25% of trauma-related mortality. Among patients presenting with chest trauma, flail chest is identified in about 7%, reflecting its status as a specialized but critical subset of thoracic injuries [2]. Hospitalization is typically required due to the complexity of care and the potential for respiratory compromise. Isolated flail chest is uncommon, occurring in fewer than 40% of cases. More frequently, patients present with concurrent injuries, including pulmonary contusions, hemothorax, pneumothorax, head trauma, and, less commonly, major vascular injuries. These associated injuries are primary determinants of patient outcomes

and largely drive the reported mortality rates, which range from 10% to 20% [3]. Flail chest itself rarely proves fatal in isolation; however, it contributes to substantial morbidity through impaired ventilation, increased risk of pneumonia, and extended durations of mechanical ventilation when required. Recovery is often prolonged, requiring intensive monitoring and multidisciplinary care. The prevalence of flail chest, combined with its association with high-impact trauma and secondary injuries, underscores the need for early recognition and comprehensive management. Awareness of epidemiological patterns aids clinicians in risk stratification, allocation of resources, and the implementation of preventive measures in high-risk populations, particularly those involved in motor vehicle collisions or other high-energy thoracic trauma events [2][3].

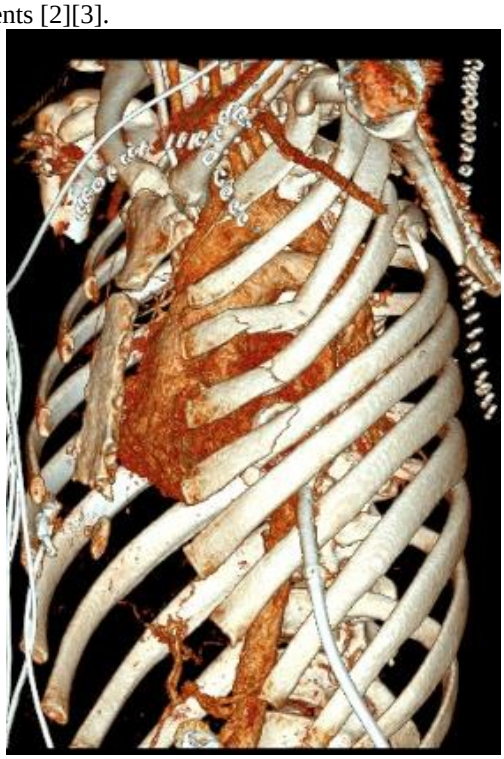

Fig. 1: Three-Dimensional Reconstruction of Flail Chest. Multiple rib fractures create a flail segment with abnormal chest wall motion.

Pathophysiology

Normal airflow depends on dynamic changes in intrathoracic pressure, which are generated by the coordinated activity of multiple respiratory muscles. Inspiration primarily involves the diaphragm, external intercostals, parasternal muscles, and accessory muscles, whereas exhalation is generally passive, relying on the elastic recoil of the lungs. During quiet breathing, diaphragmatic contraction alone is sufficient to maintain adequate ventilation. In states of increased demand, such as exercise or respiratory pathology, the intercostal and accessory muscles contribute significantly to generating inspiratory effort, allowing for greater expansion of the thoracic cavity and increased lung volumes. Exhalation may be assisted by abdominal and internal intercostal muscles, particularly during forced expiration, to maintain effective ventilation. This finely tuned system ensures efficient gas exchange and maintains arterial oxygenation under varying physiological conditions [4]. Flail chest disrupts this intricate biomechanical system by introducing a mechanically unstable segment into the thoracic wall. The fractured ribs in the flail segment move independently from the intact thoracic cage, producing paradoxical motion. During inspiration, the flail segment collapses inward while the rest of the chest wall expands outward, and during exhalation, the segment may bulge outward as the surrounding thorax contracts. The physiological impact of this paradoxical movement depends on three primary factors: the magnitude of intrapleural pressure changes, the size of the flail segment, and the degree of intercostal and accessory muscle recruitment during inspiration. This abnormal chest wall motion impairs the normal transmission of pressure changes to the lungs, reducing effective ventilation and compromising oxygenation [4].

The pathophysiological consequences of flail chest can be categorized into ineffective ventilation, pulmonary contusion, and hypoventilation with atelectasis. Ineffective ventilation arises from increased physiologic dead space and the inability of the flail segment to transmit negative intrathoracic pressure efficiently. Injured tissues also have increased metabolic demands, further exacerbating oxygen deficits. Pulmonary contusions, which are almost universally present adjacent to the flail segment, involve alveolar edema, hemorrhage, and, in severe cases, tissue necrosis. These contusions reduce pulmonary compliance, impair gas exchange, and contribute to hypoxemia [4]. Pain plays a critical role in the development of hypoventilation and subsequent atelectasis. Patients instinctively restrict chest wall movement to minimize discomfort, producing both voluntary and involuntary splinting. This results in shallow breathing, reduced tidal volumes, and an impaired ability to generate an effective cough. Retention of pulmonary secretions promotes the collapse of alveolar units and further compromises gas exchange, increasing the risk of hypoxemia, pneumonia, and prolonged respiratory dysfunction. The combination of mechanical instability, contusion-related impairment, and pain-induced hypoventilation defines the clinical severity of flail chest and underscores the importance of comprehensive management strategies aimed at restoring ventilation, controlling pain, and preventing secondary pulmonary complications [5].

History and Physical

The history of flail chest is often closely linked to major blunt thoracic trauma, which typically provides a clear context for suspicion. High-risk populations include older adults, who are more susceptible due to age-related changes in bone density

and chest wall compliance. Establishing an accurate history can be challenging in certain patient groups, including those who are nonverbal, victims of abuse, or unable to provide reliable information due to altered mental status or distracting injuries. In these cases, collateral history from witnesses or emergency responders is essential to guide early clinical assessment and intervention. Physical examination should follow a structured trauma assessment protocol to ensure that no injuries are overlooked. The patient must be fully exposed to permit thorough inspection, and vital signs should be recorded, including respiratory rate and oxygen saturation. Initial evaluation should prioritize the primary survey, focusing on airway, breathing, circulation, disability, and exposure (ABCDE), followed by a detailed secondary survey to identify additional injuries. Careful auscultation of bilateral breath sounds is necessary, alongside palpation of the chest wall to detect tenderness, deformity, or crepitus. Visual inspection of the thorax may reveal contusions, lacerations, or seatbelt marks indicative of blunt trauma. Patients frequently report severe, localized chest pain and exhibit tachypnea, splinting, or other signs of respiratory compromise. Flail chest presents with pronounced tenderness over the fracture sites and signs of respiratory distress, such as dyspnea and increased respiratory rate. A hallmark diagnostic feature is paradoxical chest wall motion, in which the flail segment moves inward during inspiration while the intact thoracic wall expands, and outward during expiration as the chest contracts. However, paradoxical motion may not be immediately apparent, particularly in patients who restrict chest wall movement due to pain, resulting in shallow respirations. The sign can become more prominent as intercostal muscle fatigue develops. Notably, positive pressure ventilation alters normal thoracic mechanics and eliminates paradoxical motion. Patients receiving bilevel positive airway pressure or invasive mechanical ventilation may therefore lack this diagnostic feature, and flail chest may only become evident after extubation, when spontaneous respiration resumes. Accurate identification through history and physical examination is critical for timely management, pain control, and the prevention of respiratory complications.

Evaluation

Evaluation of a patient with suspected flail chest must be integrated into the broader assessment of major multisystem trauma. Initial evaluation includes all standard examinations and studies employed in trauma care to identify life-threatening injuries. The extended focused assessment with sonography in trauma (eFAST) is frequently used to detect complications such as pneumothorax or hemothorax; however, it provides limited utility in directly identifying flail chest. Clinical suspicion often prompts radiographic imaging as the next step. Standard chest radiography is commonly the first modality used, but its sensitivity is limited even when two views are obtained, and rib fractures may be overlooked. A rib series, which incorporates posteroanterior and oblique projections, increases the likelihood of detecting fractures but may still fail to identify up to 25% of injuries [6]. Dependence solely on radiography carries the risk of underdiagnosis, emphasizing the need for additional imaging in high-risk patients. Computed tomography (CT) has become the imaging standard for evaluating flail chest and associated thoracic injuries. CT scanning, particularly with 3-dimensional reconstruction, provides precise delineation of rib fracture patterns, flail segments, and secondary thoracic injuries, allowing for accurate clinical correlation. Identification of three or more consecutive ribs fractured in two or more locations suggests a flail segment; however, this finding must be interpreted alongside clinical signs such as paradoxical motion, pain, and respiratory compromise to confirm the diagnosis. CT imaging also supports management decisions, including surgical stabilization and planning for mechanical ventilation. Laboratory evaluation is complementary and plays a crucial role in monitoring physiological status, rather than directly diagnosing flail chest. Arterial blood gas analysis is particularly important to assess oxygenation, ventilation, and acid-base balance. These data help clinicians track the progression of respiratory compromise, detect early signs of hypoxemia or hypercapnia, and guide interventions such as supplemental oxygen or ventilatory support. Additional laboratory studies may be warranted to evaluate coexisting injuries, assess hemodynamic stability, and identify systemic responses to trauma. A comprehensive evaluation that integrates clinical assessment, imaging, and laboratory monitoring ensures timely recognition of flail chest, allows for effective triage, and facilitates appropriate therapeutic interventions to prevent respiratory deterioration and reduce morbidity.

Treatment / Management

Management of flail chest requires a multifaceted approach that integrates pain control, respiratory support, pulmonary hygiene, fluid management, and the avoidance of outdated interventions. Nonoperative strategies are the mainstay for most patients and are centered on maintaining adequate ventilation while minimizing complications. Effective analgesia is critical to achieving these goals, as uncontrolled pain can precipitate hypoventilation, atelectasis, and subsequent pulmonary infections. Regional techniques, including thoracic epidural and paravertebral blocks, provide targeted pain relief, reduce systemic opioid requirements, and improve respiratory mechanics. Multimodal analgesic regimens combining nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs, acetaminophen, and opioids when necessary optimize patient comfort and facilitate deeper, more effective breathing efforts. Adequate pain control is

directly linked to improved pulmonary outcomes and a reduced need for mechanical ventilation [7]. Respiratory support is tailored to the severity of the patient's injury and underlying comorbidities. Supplemental oxygen is typically initiated to maintain adequate arterial oxygenation. Noninvasive ventilation (NIV) can be effective in preventing intubation in selected patients but requires careful monitoring for failure, as delayed intubation can worsen outcomes. In cases of severe respiratory compromise or concurrent injuries requiring ventilatory support, invasive mechanical ventilation is indicated. Positive pressure ventilation, originally described as "internal pneumatic stabilization" by Avery et al in 1956, restores coordinated movement between the flail segment and the intact chest wall, improving tidal volumes and gas exchange. Modern ventilatory strategies, including volume-limited and lung-protective ventilation, have contributed to reduced mortality in patients with severe flail chest. Prolonged ventilation, however, increases the risk of ventilator-associated pneumonia, necessitating meticulous monitoring and timely weaning to minimize complications [8][9].

Pulmonary hygiene is essential to prevent atelectasis and secondary infections. Deep breathing exercises, incentive spirometry, early mobilization, and physiotherapy enhance mucociliary clearance and promote effective coughing. Retention of pulmonary secretions in patients with inadequate ventilation or pain-related splinting is a major contributor to pneumonia and prolonged hospital stay. Fluid management must balance the need for hemodynamic stability with the risk of worsening pulmonary injury. Judicious administration of isotonic fluids is recommended, as excessive hydration can exacerbate pulmonary contusions and precipitate acute respiratory distress syndrome. Outdated interventions such as external chest wall taping and corticosteroid therapy are no longer recommended due to lack of efficacy and potential harm. Prehospital care focuses on airway, breathing, and circulation stabilization while avoiding high-pressure ventilation that could aggravate associated pneumothorax. Surgical stabilization of rib fractures (SSRF) has emerged as a valuable option in patients with severe or refractory flail chest. Techniques include open reduction with internal fixation, minimally invasive video-assisted thoracoscopic surgery, and percutaneous methods. The objectives of surgical intervention are to restore chest wall integrity, reduce pain, improve ventilatory mechanics, and accelerate recovery. SSRF is particularly indicated in patients with persistent respiratory compromise, severe pain unresponsive to analgesia, or prolonged ventilatory dependence. When appropriately applied, surgical stabilization complements nonoperative measures, optimizing outcomes and reducing morbidity associated with flail chest [7][8][9].

Indications and Contraindications for Surgical Stabilization of Rib Fractures

The decision to perform surgical stabilization of rib fractures (SSRF) requires a comprehensive evaluation of the patient's clinical status, the specific fracture pattern, coexisting injuries, and institutional resources. According to the 2024 position paper by the World Society of Emergency Surgery and the Chest Wall Injury Society, key indications for SSRF include flail chest associated with respiratory compromise or prolonged dependence on mechanical ventilation. Patients who fail extubation after 7 to 14 days are considered prime candidates. Significant chest wall deformity or loss of thoracic volume exceeding 30% on imaging studies also warrants surgical consideration, as these structural deficits can substantially impair ventilatory mechanics and functional recovery [10]. Persistent, severe pain that is unresponsive to optimal nonoperative strategies constitutes another indication for SSRF, particularly when pain limits adequate ventilation and contributes to pulmonary complications. Symptomatic nonunion or malunion of rib fractures causing chronic pain or functional limitation can also justify surgical intervention. Opportunities for concurrent stabilization during thoracotomy for other intrathoracic procedures are advantageous, as they allow repair without additional operative exposure. SSRF is further recommended for patients with multiple displaced ipsilateral rib fractures, even in the absence of a flail segment, if these fractures are associated with respiratory dysfunction. Pulmonary herniation resulting from chest wall defects represents an additional indication, as surgical repair is necessary to restore thoracic integrity and prevent further compromise [10]. Absolute contraindications to SSRF include hemodynamic instability, fractures outside ribs three to ten except in select circumstances, acute myocardial infarction, and historically, severe traumatic brain injury (TBI), although recent evidence suggests that select TBI patients may still benefit from stabilization. Relative contraindications include age under 18, significant comorbid conditions, mild to moderate TBI or spinal cord injury, pleural empyema, prior chest wall irradiation, extensive soft tissue loss, and inability to safely position the patient for surgery. These relative factors require careful risk-benefit assessment to determine suitability for operative intervention [10]. Timing of SSRF is a critical determinant of outcomes. Early surgical intervention, within 48 to 72 hours of injury, is associated with improved clinical results, including reduced duration of mechanical ventilation, shorter intensive care unit and hospital stays, lower incidence of pneumonia, and decreased requirement for tracheostomy. Delayed surgery beyond 72 hours is less favorable due to increased technical difficulty and the potential for ongoing inflammation, although it may still be indicated for addressing chronic complications such as

nonunion or persistent deformity. Operating during the peak inflammatory phase, typically after the initial 72 hours, may contribute to higher complication rates and suboptimal functional recovery. These findings underscore the importance of prompt assessment and timely decision-making to optimize the benefits of SSRF while minimizing perioperative risks [11][12][13][14][15].

Surgical Technique and Hardware

Surgical stabilization of rib fractures (SSRF) relies on precise preoperative planning, which is facilitated by detailed imaging, ideally including three-dimensional computed tomography (CT) reconstructions. These reconstructions allow accurate visualization of fracture patterns, identification of displaced segments, and assessment of thoracic volume loss or deformity. SSRF is performed under general anesthesia, frequently employing single-lung ventilation to optimize exposure and minimize injury to the contralateral lung. Surgical incisions are strategically planned to preserve muscle tissue and maintain chest wall integrity, and intraoperative ultrasound may be used to localize rib fractures with high precision. Not all rib fractures require fixation; stability is often achieved by addressing only the most displaced or mechanically unstable segments, reducing operative time and minimizing soft tissue disruption [16]. Various fixation systems are available for SSRF. Bicortical screw plating systems are widely used and typically consist of precontoured titanium plates with locking screw options, examples of which include MatrixRib and RibFix Blu. These systems provide rigid stabilization while conforming to the natural curvature of the ribs. U-plate systems, such as RibLoc U Plus, offer broader load distribution and enhanced construct strength, particularly useful in patients with multiple fractures or poor bone quality. Intramedullary devices, including splints or K-wires, may be employed for fractures that are not amenable to conventional plating. Bioresorbable implants were previously used but are now less favored due to higher early failure rates. Judet struts, once standard for rib fixation, are largely obsolete given advances in modern plating systems [16]. Outcomes are optimized when fixation is limited to fractures that most significantly contribute to chest wall instability, as this approach supports faster recovery, reduces postoperative pain, and decreases the risk of complications such as infection or hardware failure. Postoperative care is critical to ensure healing and maintain respiratory function. Surgical wounds are closed in layers to promote tissue integrity, and chest tubes are placed whenever the pleural cavity has been entered to evacuate air or fluid and prevent pneumothorax. Perioperative analgesia is often delivered via thoracic epidural catheters, providing continuous regional pain control that facilitates effective coughing, deep breathing, and early mobilization. Postoperative monitoring includes assessment of respiratory status, pain management, and surveillance for complications such as infection, hematoma, or hardware loosening. Combined with careful patient selection and precise surgical technique, these measures contribute to improved outcomes, shorter hospital stays, and enhanced functional recovery following SSRF [16].

Differential Diagnosis

The evaluation of a patient with suspected flail chest requires careful consideration of several alternative diagnoses that can mimic or complicate the presentation. Acute aortic dissection must be considered in patients with severe chest pain, particularly when associated with hemodynamic instability or mediastinal widening on imaging. Pulmonary contusions in pediatric trauma may occur without rib fractures and can present with respiratory distress similar to flail chest; nonaccidental trauma should also be considered in children presenting with thoracic injury patterns inconsistent with history. Congenital chest wall anomalies, such as pectus excavatum or carinatum, may further complicate assessment in pediatric patients and can alter normal chest wall motion [16]. Suspected abuse is an important consideration in both older adults and vulnerable populations. Bruising patterns, inconsistent histories, or repeated injuries should raise concern for domestic violence or elder abuse, which can present with rib fractures or thoracic trauma. Clavicle and sternal fractures can also produce localized pain, tenderness, and impaired respiratory mechanics, mimicking the effects of a flail segment. Pneumothorax and pulmonary embolism must be considered, particularly when hypoxemia or sudden respiratory compromise occurs, as both conditions may require immediate intervention [17]. Mechanical back pain and upper genitourinary trauma may present with referred pain to the thoracic or costal regions, potentially confounding the diagnosis. Esophagitis, although less common, may cause retrosternal pain that can be mistaken for thoracic trauma in patients unable to communicate effectively. A thorough assessment, including detailed history, physical examination, and appropriate imaging, is essential to differentiate flail chest from these alternative conditions. Accurate identification ensures timely initiation of appropriate management, prevents unnecessary interventions, and reduces the risk of complications associated with delayed or misdiagnosis. Awareness of the broad spectrum of potential mimics underscores the importance of a systematic and comprehensive evaluation in patients presenting with thoracic trauma or respiratory compromise [16].

Prognosis

The prognosis of patients with flail chest varies considerably based on the severity of the injury, the presence of comorbidities, and the need for mechanical ventilation. Individuals who do not require ventilatory support generally experience a more favorable outcome, with lower rates of respiratory

failure and shorter hospital stays. In these patients, recovery is often more rapid, and the risk of complications such as pneumonia or prolonged hypoxemia is reduced. Conversely, patients requiring mechanical ventilation, particularly those with bilateral flail segments, concomitant pulmonary contusions, or additional multisystem trauma, face a higher risk of adverse outcomes. Mortality in flail chest is often related to associated injuries rather than the flail segment itself, but prolonged ventilatory dependence significantly increases the likelihood of complications including ventilator-associated pneumonia, sepsis, and multiorgan dysfunction [17]. Even in survivors, flail chest can result in substantial long-term morbidity. Chronic pain is a frequent sequela, persisting for months or years in some cases and affecting quality of life and daily functioning. Persistent chest wall instability or malunion of fractures may lead to deformity and reduced thoracic compliance, contributing to ongoing respiratory symptoms such as dyspnea and limited exercise tolerance. Psychological sequelae, including anxiety related to trauma or prolonged hospitalization, may further impact recovery. Early recognition, aggressive pain management, appropriate respiratory support, and timely surgical intervention when indicated can improve outcomes, reduce long-term complications, and enhance overall functional recovery [17].

Complications

Flail chest is associated with a range of acute and chronic complications that can significantly affect patient morbidity. Severe and persistent pain is one of the most common complications, often resulting from both fracture instability and injury to surrounding soft tissues. This pain can limit effective ventilation, promote splinting, and contribute to pulmonary complications such as atelectasis and pneumonia. Chest wall deformity may develop, particularly in cases with significant displacement or malunion of rib fractures. Such deformities can alter normal respiratory mechanics, impair lung expansion, and reduce overall pulmonary compliance [18][17]. Dyspnea is frequently observed, stemming from a combination of reduced chest wall stability, pulmonary contusion, and compromised gas exchange. Loss of exercise endurance is another common consequence, reflecting both diminished ventilatory capacity and pain-limited activity. These long-term sequelae can interfere with daily activities and reduce overall quality of life. Additional complications may include secondary infections, prolonged ventilatory dependence, and musculoskeletal issues related to chronic pain and altered biomechanics. Comprehensive care that includes effective analgesia, respiratory support, physiotherapy, and surgical stabilization when indicated is essential to prevent or mitigate these complications. Early multidisciplinary management reduces the incidence of severe morbidity and supports a more rapid and complete recovery.

Patient Education

Prevention of flail chest relies primarily on reducing exposure to high-risk trauma through education and safety measures. Seatbelt use in vehicles remains one of the most effective preventive interventions, significantly decreasing the incidence of severe thoracic injuries during collisions. The use of protective gear in high-risk activities, including sports and occupational settings, further reduces the likelihood of rib fractures and chest wall trauma. Public education campaigns are essential for raising awareness about fall prevention, particularly in older adults, as well as safe driving practices among all populations [18]. Healthcare professionals play a critical role in early recognition and intervention. Paramedics, emergency clinicians, trauma surgeons, and nurses must be trained to promptly assess patients with thoracic trauma, identify flail segments, and initiate appropriate pain control and respiratory support. Patient education is equally important, emphasizing the need to seek immediate medical attention after any significant chest injury. Teaching patients about early signs of respiratory compromise, proper use of analgesics, and the benefits of early mobilization and pulmonary hygiene can further reduce the risk of complications. By combining preventive strategies, professional training, and public awareness, the incidence and severity of flail chest can be minimized, optimizing both immediate and long-term patient outcomes.

Enhancing Healthcare Team Outcomes

Flail chest represents a severe thoracic injury with significant potential for morbidity and prolonged recovery. Effective management requires a structured, interprofessional team approach, with clear communication and coordinated responsibilities across all disciplines involved in patient care. Optimal outcomes depend on timely interventions targeting ventilatory support, pain control, and pulmonary hygiene, which cannot be achieved in isolation by any single provider. Collaboration between physicians, nurses, respiratory therapists, pain specialists, dietitians, and physical therapists is essential to ensure comprehensive care and minimize complications [17][18]. Patients with flail chest are typically admitted to the hospital, and those with severe respiratory compromise or multiple injuries may require intensive care. Nurses play a central role in monitoring vital signs, assessing respiratory function, and recognizing early indicators of complications such as hypoxemia, pneumothorax, or infection. They must coordinate closely with physicians to adjust care plans, escalate interventions, and manage pharmacologic treatments. Respiratory therapists support airway clearance and maintain adequate ventilation, assisting with techniques such as incentive spirometry, suctioning, and noninvasive ventilation. Pain

management is critical, as most patients experience moderate to severe pain that can limit effective breathing. Pain specialists implement regional anesthesia, epidural infusions, or multimodal analgesia to facilitate deeper respirations and reduce the risk of pulmonary complications. Nutrition and physical conditioning are also important for recovery. Dietitians assess caloric and protein needs to prevent muscle wasting, enhance wound healing, and maintain immune function. Physical therapists implement early mobilization and exercises to prevent contractures, improve chest wall mechanics, and maintain functional independence. Patients undergoing mechanical ventilation or surgical stabilization of rib fractures require ongoing multidisciplinary coordination to monitor for ventilator-associated complications, ensure prophylaxis against deep vein thrombosis and stress ulcers, and optimize postoperative recovery.

Clinical outcomes are strongly influenced by the severity of injury and the presence of associated organ trauma. Mortality rates for flail chest combined with other organ injuries range from 5% to 10%, with complications including acute respiratory distress syndrome, pneumonia, sepsis, and respiratory failure. Patients who do not require mechanical ventilation generally experience more favorable outcomes, whereas prolonged intubation increases the risk of secondary complications and delays recovery. Even in isolated flail chest, rehabilitation may be prolonged, with full recovery often requiring six to twelve months. Persistent chest wall pain can continue for years in some patients, highlighting the importance of comprehensive, coordinated care and long-term follow-up [19]. An interprofessional approach ensures that each aspect of patient care—respiratory support, pain control, nutrition, mobility, and complication prevention—is addressed systematically. By fostering teamwork, communication, and shared decision-making, healthcare teams can minimize morbidity, accelerate functional recovery, and improve overall patient outcomes in flail chest management.

Conclusion:

Flail chest remains a critical thoracic injury associated with substantial morbidity, often complicated by pulmonary contusions, severe pain, and impaired ventilation. Effective management requires early diagnosis through integrated clinical assessment and imaging, with CT scanning serving as the diagnostic gold standard for fracture characterization. Multimodal analgesia, respiratory support, and vigilant pulmonary hygiene form the cornerstone of nonoperative care, reducing the risk of atelectasis, hypoxemia, and pneumonia. Selected patients benefit significantly from surgical stabilization of rib fractures, particularly those with persistent respiratory compromise, chest wall deformity, or prolonged mechanical ventilation, as early SSRF has been shown to shorten hospital stays and improve respiratory mechanics. Long-term outcomes depend on injury severity and comorbid conditions, with some patients experiencing chronic pain or reduced pulmonary function. Coordinated multidisciplinary care is essential to enhance patient recovery, minimize complications, and optimize functional outcomes.

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