

# Pulmonary Embolism

## What Is Pulmonary Embolism (PE)?

Pulmonary means "lungs," and embolism means "blockage or obstruction." A **pulmonary embolism (PE)** happens when a blood clot gets trapped in an artery in the lung. The clot usually travels from the deep veins in the legs.

# **Symptoms**

The most common symptoms of PE are unexplained shortness of breath and/or chest pain with difficulty breathing. But warning signs can be different for each person.

Some people may experience:

- Chest pain that is worse when taking a breath
- Feeling nervous or anxious
- Fainting and/or losing consciousness
- Coughing up blood or bloody mucus
- Excessive sweating
- Fever
- Leg pain or swelling, or both
- Discolored skin (appearing blue or gray)

A pulmonary embolism is a medical emergency. If you experience these symptoms and have any risk factors for PE, get medical attention right away.

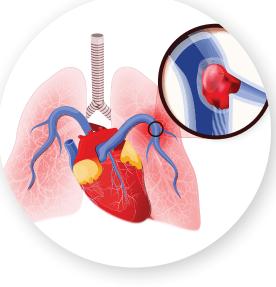
# Diagnosis

PE can be difficult to diagnose, especially if you already have heart or lung disease. It's been called "the Great Masquerader" because it can mimic pneumonia, congestive heart failure, and **pleurisy** (a condition that causes lung tissue inflammation).

Your health care provider may order more than one test to figure out if you have PE:

- Blood test: A D-dimer blood test looks for a protein that's made when a blood clot dissolves in your body. If levels are high, you might have PE. Other blood tests can check the amount of oxygen and carbon dioxide in your blood. They can also reveal if you have an inherited clotting disorder.
- Chest X-ray: An X-ray shows images of the heart and lungs. They help rule out other health conditions that may mimic PE.
- Computed tomography pulmonary angiography (CTPA): This imaging test creates 3D pictures of the arteries of the lungs. It can detect abnormalities such as PE.

 Lung V/Q scan: Special X-ray scanners show which parts of your lungs are getting blood flow and airflow. This can tell providers if there's a blood clot in your lungs.



For more information, review these related flyers:

- Focus on Blood Clots
- Understanding Deep Vein
  Thrombosis

## Treatment

There are two main goals when treating a pulmonary embolism:

- 1. Stop the blood clot from getting bigger
- 2. Prevent new clots from forming

It is important to talk with your health care team about what treatment and medication plan is best for you.

#### **Medications:**

- Blood thinners (anticoagulants): This type of medication helps prevent existing clots from getting bigger. It also helps break up clots.
- Clot dissolvers (thrombolytics): Some clots dissolve on their own, but thrombolytics can help them dissolve faster. These are usually reserved for lifethreatening situations because they can cause severe and sudden bleeding.

#### **Surgery and Other Procedures:**

 Removing the clot: Large, life-threatening clots may be removed physically with a thin, flexible tube (called a catheter). The surgeon guides the catheter through a blood vessel to reach the clot.

# **RISK FACTORS**



There are certain things that increase the chances of developing a PE, including:

- Not being able to move around or exercise regularly
- Using tobacco or smoking cigarettes
- Carrying extra weight
- Having high blood pressure
- Being diagnosed with cancer
- Going on long airplane flights

- Experiencing trauma to the leg, such as a broken hip or leg bone
- Taking hormonal birth control
- Pregnancy
- Undergoing hormone replacement therapy
- Genetic conditions, like the factor V Leiden mutation
- Vein filter: A filter can be surgically implanted in the body's main vein to prevent clots from going to the lungs. This procedure is for people who are not able to take blood thinners, or for those who tried blood thinners but the medicine didn't help. The filter can be taken out when it is no longer needed.

#### **Prevention**

The best course of action is prevention. If you've been told you have deep vein thrombosis (DVT) or a deep vein blood clot and are at risk for PE, talk with a provider right away.

# Questions for Your Doctor

It is important to



work closely with your health care provider about your diagnosis and treatment. You can bring this form with you to help talk to your medical provider about any questions and concerns you may have.

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