

Pulmonary Embolism (PE)



What Is Pulmonary Embolism?

Pulmonary embolism (PE) happens when the blood supply to the lungs is blocked by a blood clot. The blood clot usually forms in the legs and then travels to the lungs and gets stuck there. The blockage can damage part of your lung and cause low oxygen levels in your blood. Certain factors increase your risk for blood clots, such as:

- A major injury, such as a broken leg
- A major operation, such as knee replacement surgery
- A long time not moving, such as on an airplane trip or being bedridden
- Some cancers
- Stroke or paralysis
- Pregnancy



What Are the Warning Signs of Pulmonary Embolism?

- Feeling short of breath
- Sharp chest pain when you breathe in
- Coughing or coughing up blood
- Fast heartbeat
- Leg pain or swelling
- Dizziness or fainting



How Is Pulmonary Embolism Diagnosed?

If you have trouble breathing or any other symptoms of PE, call 911 right away. Once you are in the hospital:

- A doctor will ask you about your medical history and symptoms.
- The doctor will also listen to your heart and lungs and check for signs of blood clots in your legs.
- Blood tests and imaging tests, like an X-ray or ultrasound, can help tell if you have PE.



How Is Pulmonary Embolism Treated?

Blood clots in the lungs can be deadly. That's why it's important to get emergency care fast.

- Treatment includes blood thinners to prevent blood clots from getting bigger and to reduce your risk for future clots.
- Most blood clots will dissolve over time on their own. In extremely serious cases, you may need to have surgery to remove clots or get medicines that go directly into the bloodstream to dissolve clots.

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Questions for My Doctor

- What increases my risk for PE?
- How long do I have to stay in the hospital?
- How can I prevent a PE from happening again?
- If I have had a PE, can I still travel?
- What are the risks of blood thinners?
- How long will I need to be on medicines to prevent clots?
- Will I need to stop any activities?



Bottom Line

- Pulmonary embolism (PE) is when blood supply to the lungs is blocked by a blood clot.
- PE makes it hard to breathe. Other symptoms include sharp chest pain, coughing, coughing up blood, and feeling like your heart is beating fast.
- PE is a medical emergency. Call 911 immediately if you have symptoms.
- Treatment includes medicines to prevent clots from getting bigger and to reduce the risk of new clots.

For More Information

- **MedlinePlus:**
www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/pulmonaryembolism.html
- **National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute:**
www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/health-topics/topics/pe/
- **Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ):**
www.ahrq.gov/patients-consumers/diagnosis-treatment/treatments/btpills/btpills.html

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