



*Palo Alto Medical
Foundation*

A Sutter Health Affiliate

Pulmonary Embolism (PE)

What is a pulmonary embolism?

A pulmonary embolism is condition in which one or more blood clots block an artery in your lung. Commonly, the blood clot(s) travel from another part of your body (like your legs).

What are the symptoms of a pulmonary embolism?

The most common symptoms are sudden shortness of breath, chest pain (which may hurt more when you cough or take a deep breath), and sometimes a cough that produces a small amount of blood. Other symptoms can include lightheadedness, fainting or a fast pulse.

What can cause a pulmonary embolism?

- immobility/inactivity (prolonged sitting/bed rest)
- certain surgical procedures (like hip, knee, or gynecologic surgeries)
- pregnancy
- obesity
- certain medications (like birth control pills)
- smoking
- cancer
- genetic predisposition
- family history

How is a pulmonary embolism diagnosed?

The most common diagnostic tests include: chest X-ray, lung scans and CT scans. A D-dimer blood test and/or ultrasound may also be used.

How is a pulmonary embolism treated?

Medications: Anticoagulants such as warfarin, enoxaparin and heparin are most commonly used to treat a pulmonary embolism by preventing clots from growing and new ones from forming. Thrombolytic agents are less often used (usually in life-threatening situations) but actually help dissolve clots; treatment with these agents requires hospitalization.

Surgery/vein filter: Only used if the clot is life-threatening or the patient cannot use medications.

How can I prevent having a future pulmonary embolism?

Take anticoagulant medications as directed!

Maintain a healthy lifestyle: Exercise regularly, manage your weight and don't smoke.

If bedridden: Elevate the foot of your bed, do leg exercises and consider compression stockings.

While traveling: Keep hydrated, walk around for five minutes for every one to two hours, avoid crossing your legs, avoid short socks that are tight, do leg exercises while seated and consider compression stockings.