

# Pulmonary Embolism (PE)

## What you need to know

Pulmonary embolism (PE) happens after a blood clot, known as a deep vein thrombosis or DVT, forms in a vein and then breaks loose. After it breaks loose, it travels through your blood stream to an artery in the lung.

Having a PE is dangerous. It slows down the flow of blood and oxygen to certain parts of your body. It can cause damage to your lung and other organs. In some cases, it can cause death.

## PE can come on suddenly, without warning.

### Major signs are:

- Having a hard time breathing or a sudden shortness of breath.
- A chest pain that gets worse when you take a deep breath.
- Coughing up blood.

### Other signs include:

- Sudden feelings of anxiety or dread.
- Feeling lightheaded or faint.
- Fast breathing.
- Sweating.
- Racing heartbeat.

### Sometimes signs of PE are the same as DVT. These include:

- Swelling or tenderness in a leg or along a vein in the leg.
- Pain or tenderness in the leg or behind the knee.
- Feeling warm in one part of the leg.
- Red or discolored skin on the leg.

## How will I know if I have PE?

To find out if you have PE, your doctor will run some tests.

These tests include:

- **Ultrasound.** This test looks for blood clots in your legs.
- **CT scan or CT angiogram.** This test looks for blood clots in your lungs and legs.

- **VQ scan** (ventilation-perfusion lung scan). The VQ scan can show how well oxygen **and** blood are flowing to your lungs.
- **D-dimer test.** This is a blood test that measures a certain substance in your blood. This substance is released when a blood clot breaks up. High amounts might mean there's a clot.

Your doctor might run other tests to find out if there are other reasons for your symptoms.

## What is the treatment for PE?

If you have PE you'll be treated in the hospital. The main goals for treatment are to:

- Make sure the blood clot doesn't get bigger.
- Keep new clots from forming.

Your doctor will give you medicines, called blood thinners, to keep you from getting more blood clots. Your doctor might start you on 2 medicines at the same time. One of the medicines, enoxaparin (also called Lovenox®), is fast-acting. It's taken by shot. The other medicine, warfarin (also called Coumadin®), is taken as a pill. It can take 2 to 3 days before it starts to work. Once the warfarin is working you won't need to take enoxaparin any longer.

If your PE is life threatening, your doctor might use other treatments to remove or break up the clot in your lung. These treatments can include:

- Medicines called thrombolytics.
- Placing a tube, called a catheter, into the vein in your lung.
- Surgery, in very rare cases.