What is pulmonary embolism (PE)?

Pulmonary embolism (PUL-ma-neh-ree EM-ba-li-zum), also known as PE, is a life-threatening condition where the blood flow in your lungs is blocked. This is usually caused by a loose blood clot that traveled through the bloodstream to the lungs.

What symptoms are common in PE?

Symptoms may include:

- Shortness of breath or chest pain
- Cough, even coughing up blood
- Leg pain, swelling, or both
- Clammy skin or changes in your skin color
- Heavy sweating
- Fast or irregular heartbeat
- Feeling lightheaded or dizzy

Most of the clots in PE come from:

1. A blood clot that formed in a vein deep in your body. This is called deep vein thrombosis (deep vayn throm-BO-sis), or DVT
   - This clot usually starts in your lower leg or thigh
2. The clot could break away and be carried to your lungs through the bloodstream
3. Once in your lungs, the clot could block blood flow

Reasons for a blood clot can include:

- Keeping still for a long time
- Blood clotting disorder
- Cancer or cancer treatment
- Older age
- Heart failure
- Pacemaker or vein catheter
- Smoking
- Pregnancy or giving birth
- Medicines, like birth control
- Inflammatory bowel disease
- Being overweight
- Personal/family history of lung or deep vein clots
- Vein injury
- Surgery and certain medicines given during surgery

You have a higher chance of developing PE if you’ve had a clot in your lung or in a vein deep in your body before.
What can happen with PE?
PE can block blood flow to the lungs, which can damage your lungs. It can also lower the amount of oxygen in your blood, which can cause damage to other organs, or even death.

How is PE treated?
Goals for treating PE are:
• Stopping the blood clot in your lungs from getting any bigger
• Keeping new clots from forming
Your doctor may give you a medicine, such as a blood thinner, to help lower your blood’s ability to clot, and to stop a clot you already have from getting bigger. Depending on the seriousness of your symptoms, other treatments may include a medicine to help dissolve the clot quickly or, rarely, a surgical procedure.

Your doctor will determine which treatment option is right for you.

This health information is provided for educational purposes only and is not intended to replace your discussions with a healthcare professional. All decisions regarding patient care must be made with a healthcare professional, who can consider the unique aspects of the patient.