

Treating a blood clot in your lungs (pulmonary embolism)

Respiratory Medicine

Information for Patients

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What is a pulmonary embolism?

It is a blocked blood vessel in your lungs. The clot usually forms in the leg (deep vein thrombosis) and travels to the lung, where it gets lodged.

Why did I get a PE?

It is difficult to say exactly why some people tend to form more clots than others, but there are some conditions which increase the likelihood of forming clots. There are some known risk factors listed below but we may not always find a reason.

Risk factors for PE:

- Recent hospital stay for surgery, especially for hips or knees
- Getting older, reduced mobility
- Obesity
- Oral contraceptive pills or Hormone replacement therapies (HRT)
- Previous history of clots or family history of clots
- Cancer
- Pregnancy
- Long haul travel
- Blood clotting problems

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What are my treatment options?

The usual treatment option is blood thinners (anticoagulants) which prevents your blood from clotting easily.

The medication comes in 2 forms:

Injection:

Heparin is given as an injection under the skin at about the same time every day.

Tablets:

Warfarin is the one of the oldest known drugs used for this condition. It is a once a day dose. Warfarin needs regular blood tests to check the ability of the blood to form clots (INR test). The dose may need to be altered often as warfarin is known to be affected by use of antibiotics and changes in the diet.

There are newer anti-coagulants available (Directly Acting Oral Anticoagulant (DOAC) - like rivaroxaban, apixaban, dabigatran, edoxaban. The dose is usually 1 or 2 times a day. These do not need regular monitoring.

Your specialist nurse or doctor will help you choose the best option for you and give you information booklets and an alert card. You should keep this alert card with you in case of an emergency.

How long do I need to take these medications?

Treatment is personalised and could be from 3 months up to life-long. This will be discussed with you by the specialist nurse. You will be seen by one of our doctors in an outpatients clinic in 3 to 6 months to help you decide further. Missing a few doses can be fatal. You should only stop taking your blood thinners after discussion with a specialist.

How long will my symptoms last?

Recovery from PE varies, and it can take many months to return to your previous level of fitness in some patients.

Frequently asked questions

Q: I have an appointment with the dentist, do I stop the medication?

A: Please discuss with the GP about stopping any of these medication. Generally once the decision has been made by the Doctor, they can be stopped for 24 to 48 hours before the procedure and restarting once the procedure is complete. Sometimes you may need an injection instead of the tablets temporarily, but your doctor will advise this.

Q: I have a surgery, do I stop the medication?

A: It depends on the type and site of surgery. The surgeons will advise you before the procedure, so it is important for you tell them as soon as possible.

Q: I have cut myself, do I stop the medication?

A: Generally smaller cuts and scrapes will not need any medical attention. They will generally take a little longer to stop. Please apply pressure to the site of the injury. For larger cuts where there is a large amount of blood loss or where pressure cannot be applied, please contact 999.

Q: What are some symptoms to watch out for?

A: If you have any of the following symptoms please stop taking your anti-coagulant and get medical attention immediately

- unexpected or uncontrollable bleeding
- blood when you cough or are sick (vomit)
- black poo (stools) or blood in your poo
- a severe headache that will not go away, dizziness or weakness

Q: What if I become suddenly unwell?

A: If your symptoms get worse (worsening pain or shortness of breath, dizziness or bleeding) please get medical advice urgently.

Contact details

If you have a question about your diagnosis or treatment you can call us on the Leicester Hospitals number 0300 303 1573 and ask to be put through to extension 12231

In the event of an emergency dial 999.

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