Chest tubes

What is a chest tube, and why do I need one?
A chest tube is a plastic tube that drains air or extra fluid from the space around your lungs because of certain diseases, or after an injury or surgery. A chest tube may also be placed before surgery involving the lung area.

How is the chest tube inserted?
The chest tube is placed through the skin on the side with the extra air or fluid. You'll be awake during the procedure, but will usually be given medicine for pain and to help you relax.

Your healthcare provider cleans and numbs the site with medicine and makes a small cut to put the tube in. Then the healthcare provider stitches the tube to your skin to help prevent it from coming out.

The insertion site is covered with an airtight sterile dressing. The tube is connected to a collection device, usually a large clear plastic container that sits on the floor.

How do I know if the chest tube is working?
Your healthcare provider will ask how you are feeling, listen to your lungs, check the collection device, and review chest X-rays to make sure the chest tube is working properly.

Less and less drainage in the collection device usually means your lungs are improving.

Will the chest tube hurt?
You may feel some discomfort at the chest tube site at first, but your healthcare provider can give you medicine to keep you comfortable. Let your healthcare provider know if you feel any discomfort or pain.

Must I stay in bed while I have a chest tube?
If you have a lot of fluid around your lungs, your chest tube will be connected to a suction machine attached to the wall and you may need to stay in bed. But if your chest tube isn't connected to suction, you may be allowed to walk around with your nurse's help.

How do I take care of my chest tube?
Make sure that you don't lie on the chest tube and make sure it's not kinked or being pulled. Keep the collection container upright and below your chest. Your nurse will help you to a sitting position to help promote drainage into the collection device.

Your nurse will also teach you coughing and breathing exercises. Keep the dressing clean and dry. Call your nurse if you notice any problem with the dressing; for example, if it becomes wet or starts to come off. Also, call your nurse if you have any discomfort or breathing problems.

How is the chest tube removed?
Your healthcare provider may remove the chest tube at your bedside when the air or extra fluid is gone. Usually, no pain medicine is needed. Your healthcare provider will tell you how to breathe as the tube is removed.

What should I do after the chest tube is removed?
After the tube is removed, a small airtight dressing will cover the site. You’ll probably have a follow-up chest X-ray to make sure that the fluid or air hasn't come back. Report any discomfort or change in your breathing to your healthcare provider.

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