

Department of Haematology
VTE Clinic

Pulmonary Embolism

A Patient's Guide

What is a Pulmonary Embolism (PE)?

A PE is a blood clot which has become lodged in one or more of the blood vessels that supply your lungs. The clot, or embolism, may have originated in one of your leg veins, and has migrated to your lungs.

This may cause breathlessness, chest pain and haemoptysis (coughing up blood).

Why might PE occur?

Sometimes a reason cannot be found, but the following have been identified as potential risk factors for developing a PE:

- Previous thrombosis or family history.
- Pregnancy and 6 weeks after delivery.
- Recent surgery/Trauma.
- Contraceptive pill or hormone replacement therapy.
- History of cancer.
- Over 60 years old.
- Reduced or impaired mobility.
- Being overweight.
- Certain blood clotting disorders.
- Smoking.
- Varicose veins.
- Nephrotic syndrome.
- Inflammatory bowel disease.

If you are concerned about what caused your PE, you should speak to your GP

Why is a PE treated?

- To help prevent the blood clot extending.
- To help reduce the risk of further pulmonary embolism.
- To help relieve the severe symptoms of PE.

How is PE treated?

- Treatment is with anticoagulants (blood thinners) this will be fully explained to

you by your nurse, pharmacist or doctor. Most are in tablet form but some are given by injection.

- If you are prescribed injectable anticoagulation (Heparins) please advise your health care professional if you have a latex allergy or have concerns about receiving a drug that is derived from animal origins.
- If you are prescribed Apixaban or Rivaroxaban tablets, please advise your health care professional if you have a lactose intolerance.

You will be given specific written information relating to your prescribed treatment. The anticoagulant drug you have been prescribed does not actually dissolve the clot, as this is naturally absorbed by the body over time. The drug prevents the clot becoming any bigger reduces the risk of further complications.

What are the possible side effects of the treatment?

If you take your medication as recommended, it is less likely that you will experience any problems. However, all anticoagulants increase the risk of bleeding, and it is essential that if you experience any of the following, you must contact your GP immediately, or seek urgent medical advice by dialling either 111 or 999:

- Black stools or blood in your stools.
- Blood in your urine.
- Coughing or vomiting blood.
- Heavy or persistent nosebleeds.
- Unexplained bruising or bleeding.
- Severe menstrual bleeding in women.

How long do I need to take anticoagulant medication?

The recommended duration for a PE is a minimum of 3 months however this may be extended if your symptoms persist. Long term treatment is often advised to reduce the risk of PE's in the future and especially if no clear cause for your PE is found.

This decision is based on your specific circumstances and will be discussed with you either by your GP or at a follow up hospital appointment.

After you have completed 3 months of treatment, if you are not sure whether you should stop or continue, please consult your GP.

Pain relief:

Appropriate pain relief, if required, will be discussed with you. Please avoid over the counter Non-steroidal anti-inflammatories such as Ibuprofen

General advice:

- Other medication: Always check with your GP or pharmacist before taking any medication, including herbal or alternative treatments, to ensure they are safe to take with your anticoagulant.
- Please advise any health care professional that you are taking an anticoagulant including your dentist.
- Please do not take Aspirin unless advised or prescribed by a health care professional.
- Speak to your GP if you become pregnant or are planning a pregnancy, whilst taking anticoagulants.
- Seek urgent medical help if you experience a significant blow to the head.
- Carry the alert card that is provided with your medication.

Exercise and rest:

You may find that your physical activity is limited due to your symptoms. It is advisable to avoid prolonged periods of exercise, and ensure you take adequate rest. If unsure, please check with your GP. If you also have a DVT or leg swelling it is advisable to elevate your legs on a stool, level with your hips or heart, or rest on your bed or sofa. This will help to relieve the swelling.

Travel:

You are able to continue to drive, if your symptoms allow. If you have any further queries regarding travel, please consult your GP for advice

References and further information:


www.nhs.uk

www.thrombosisuk.org

How to contact the Anticoagulant Nurse Specialists:

Tel: 01603 286286-Direct dial to switchboard, please ask them to contact us for you
Tel: 01603 287809-Direct dial to VTE clinic with answerphone

VTE Clinic
Level 2, East Block
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Communication for all