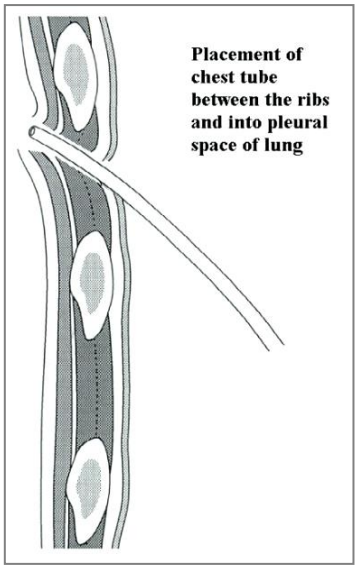
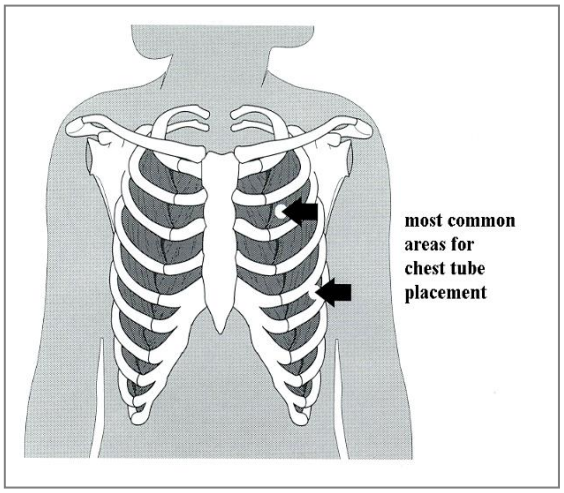
Chest Tubes

A **chest tube** is a plastic tube used to remove air, blood, or other fluids from a space between your lungs and chest cavity. This space is called the pleural space. When fluid or air collects in the pleural space, the lungs can't expand the way they should. This makes it hard for you to breathe. A chest tube is placed to remove the fluid or air so that you can breathe easier.

When Chest Tubes are Needed

- **Collapsed lung:** When air builds up in the spaces around the lungs, it can cause the lung to collapse. Removing the air allows the lung to re-expand and seal the leak.
- **Infection:** A chest tube may be used to remove infected fluid around the lung.
- **Increased fluid:** For some cancers and other conditions, large amounts of fluid builds up around the lungs. If this fluid keeps coming back, a chest tube may be used to drain the fluid and prevent build-up.





When a Chest Tube is Inserted

- The skin around the area where the chest tube is inserted will be cleaned. An anesthetic will be injected into the skin to numb the area where the chest tube will be placed. You might feel stinging or burning when the medication is administered.
- You may feel pressure to cough after the tube is inserted. It is okay to do so.
- Stitches will be used to hold the tube in place. A dressing will cover the site and need to be changed daily.
- The chest tube is attached to a drainage collection unit. It looks like a thin box with different chambers. It may or may not be connected to a suction unit on the wall.
- A chest x-ray will be taken to make sure the chest tube is in the right place.

When you Have a Chest Tube

- Tell your nurse if you have more pain or trouble breathing.
- It is very important for you to do **coughing and deep breathing exercises**. The nurses will remind you to do this.

Getting out of bed

Your provider team will decide what type of activity you can do. Most patients can get out of bed with a chest tube. If suction is needed, your nurse will order a portable suction unit that connects to the chest tube when you leave your room. The drainage collection unit should stay at least 12 inches below the level where the tube was inserted so fluids do not back flow into your chest.

If the Chest Drainage Collection Unit is Accidentally Knocked Over

If the chest drainage collection unit gets knocked over, call the nurse. Your nurse will assess the collection unit to ensure it is still set up correctly.

If the Chest Tube is Accidentally Pulled out

Call the nurse right away. Your nurse will cover the site if the chest tube completely fell out or reattach the chest tube if it became disconnected from the drainage collection unit. Your doctor will be told, and an x-ray may be needed. The chest tube will be replaced if needed.

When to Remove a Chest Tube

This is hard to predict. Your provider will decide when to remove the chest tube based on the amount of drainage and whether your lung has expanded to the normal position. This will be checked by chest x-rays. This can take several days.

Removing a Chest Tube

The provider will take the stitches out and then quickly pull out the chest tube. You may be asked to take a deep breath and hold it while the tube is being removed. You may feel a short, burning sensation or pain while the doctor is pulling the chest tube out. Take a few deep breaths after it is out. A dressing will be placed over the wound.

You will have a chest x-ray taken after the tube is removed. Sometimes a chest tube must be put back in. The x-ray helps your provider to know if this is needed.

Going Home

The dressing that was placed when your chest tube was removed should stay on for 48 hours. After 48 hours, the dressing will be changed daily while in the hospital. Keep the dressing clean and dry. The team will let you know when it is safe to shower.

Your health care team may have given you this information as part of your care. If so, please use it and call if you have any questions. If this information was not given to you as part of your care, please check with your doctor. This is not medical advice. This is not to be used for diagnosis or treatment of any medical condition. Because each person's health needs are different, you should talk with your doctor or others on your health care team when using this information. If you have an emergency, please call 911. Copyright © 6/2026 University of Wisconsin Hospitals and Clinics Authority. All rights reserved. Produced by the Department of Nursing. HF#6692