What is a chest tube?
A chest tube is a plastic tube used to remove air, blood, or other fluids from a space that exists 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 from the pleural space allowing you to breathe easier.

There are common reasons for placing chest tubes. They include:

- **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 build up around the lungs. If this fluid keeps coming back, a chest tube may be used to drain the fluid and prevent build-up.
- **Comfort** – Chest tubes can be used to drain excess fluid or air and make it easier for a patient to breathe.

What happens when a chest tube is inserted?
- You will be awake during the procedure and may be given some medicine to help with pain and to help you relax.
- The doctor will have you lie on your back.
- The skin around the area where the chest tube is inserted will be cleaned and numbed with a local anesthetic. Be sure to tell your doctor or nurse of any allergies you may have. You will have a stinging or burning feeling when the local anesthetic is injected.
- 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 and a dressing put on top. This dressing will 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 correct place.
What should I do when I have a chest tube?
You should tell your nurse if you are having increased pain or if you are having trouble breathing. The nurse will listen to your lungs and heart and place a plastic clip or sticker on your finger to measure the oxygen in your blood. The nurse will also check the chest tube and drainage unit to make sure it is working as it should. **It is very important for you to do coughing and deep breathing exercises.** The nurse will remind you to do this.

Will I be allowed out of bed?
Your doctor will decide what type of activity you can do. Most often patients can get out of bed with a chest tube. If your doctor wants you to remain on suction, your nurse will order a portable suction unit to connect the chest tube to for you to bring with you when you leave your room. The chest drainage collection unit should stay at least a foot below the level where the tube was inserted so fluids do not back flow into your chest.

What happens if I accidentally knock the chest drainage collection unit over?
If the chest drainage collection unit gets knocked over, call the nurse. Your nurse will check to see if any fluids are in the wrong chambers or if the unit is broken.

What happens if I accidentally pull out my chest tube?
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 notified and an x-ray may be obtained and the chest tube replaced if needed.

When will the chest tube be removed?
Your doctor will decide when to remove the chest tube depending on the amount of drainage and whether your lung has expanded to the normal position. This will be checked by daily chest x-rays. This process may take several days and the time to removal is very difficult to predict.

What happens when a chest tube is removed?
The doctor will take the stitches out and then quickly pull the chest tube out and put a dressing over the wound. The doctor may ask you to take a deep breath and hold it while the tube is being removed. You will 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. You will have a chest x-ray taken after the tube is removed. Occasionally a chest tube must be put back in after removal and this x-ray will help your doctor to know if this is needed. If you need any pain medicine, be sure to ask your nurse.

What should I know before I go 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. You can remove the dressing and leave the chest tube site open to air once drainage stops. Bathe or shower as usual.
Call your doctor if you have:
- Sudden chest or shoulder pain
- Trouble breathing
- A temperature greater than 101.5° F
- An increase in drainage on the dressing and/or a foul odor

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 © 11/2015 University of Wisconsin Hospitals and Clinics Authority. All rights reserved. Produced by the Department of Nursing. HF#6692