

Key Patient Messages

2026 Guideline for Evaluation and Management of Acute Pulmonary Embolism in Adults

1. **Acute pulmonary embolism (acute PE) happens when a blood clot blocks one or more arteries in the lungs.** These clots form most often in the deep veins of the legs and travel to the lungs through the bloodstream. The reduced or blocked blood flow caused by a pulmonary embolism can strain the heart and damage lung tissue. The risk can range from mild to life-threatening, depending on the size and location of the clot and the person's overall health.

Most cases of acute PE still need prompt medical evaluation and treatment to prevent the clot from getting worse or causing complications.

2. **Know the early symptoms of acute pulmonary embolism.** Symptoms can include:

- Sudden shortness of breath
- Chest pain that may get worse with deep breathing
- Coughing (sometimes with blood)
- Feeling light-headed
- A heart rate that is faster than normal for you

It is also possible to have a pulmonary embolism and not have any obvious symptoms.

3. **Health care professionals have new categories to determine how severe a patient's acute pulmonary embolism is, the best treatment options and how the patient might respond to a specific treatment.** Pulmonary embolisms are categorized based on the patient's symptoms, lab test results and scans. Patients may shift among categories as their medical team continue to assess their condition.

Lowest risk

Highest risk



There are detailed descriptions of these categories for the medical team to use. Following are general descriptions to help patients and caregivers understand each category.

Category A — This is the lowest risk category. The patient is not showing any symptoms. The pulmonary embolism may have been found while receiving medical scans for other reasons.

Category B — The patient may show some mild symptoms but has a lower chance of having severe complications or health problems from this type of pulmonary embolism.

Category C — The patient is showing symptoms and has a higher chance of having severe complications or health problems from this type of pulmonary embolism.

Category D — The patient is showing severe symptoms, such as sudden, unexplained shortness of breath (at rest or with exertion), rapid breathing, chest pain and fainting, and their heart and/or lungs are not working well. The patient may need advanced medical intervention.

Category E — This is the most serious and life-threatening category. Immediate medical attention is critical. There may not be enough blood flow reaching the patient's vital organs (brain, heart, lungs). Advanced medical treatment is needed. This could include being placed on a ventilator to help the patient breathe.

4. **A treatment that works for one person may not be the right option for another person.** Treatments may include medications that help prevent new blood clots from forming (medications called **anticoagulants**). In some cases, a minimally invasive procedure or, less often, surgery may be needed to remove the blood clot.
5. **Ask your medical team if they found the cause of the blood clot.** It's not always possible to identify the cause. Yet understanding it can help guide steps to protect your health. Having one blood clot also increases the chance of having another. Learn how to lower your risk by:
 - Engaging in **heart-healthy habits**. This includes talking with your health care professional about physical activities that are best for you.
 - Finding out if your family has a history of blood clots and how that might affect your risk of having another one.
 - Knowing which **health conditions or medications** you have that could raise your risk of another blood clot and finding out if you will need to adjust your treatment plan to help lower that risk.



6. **To provide the best medical care, a patient may see a team of specialists.** Learn more about the [medical care team](#).
7. **Treatments for pulmonary embolism can affect other areas of your health.** It's important to [talk with your health care team](#) to find a treatment plan that works best for you, even if some topics feel uncomfortable to talk about.

Here are some questions you could ask your health care professional to find out how different treatments might affect you.

- Will this treatment affect my other health conditions?
- Will this treatment affect how I travel, the physical activities I enjoy or the foods I like to eat?
- Will this treatment affect pregnancy or breastfeeding, or lead to changes in my period, such as heavier bleeding?
- Will this treatment affect my options for birth control (such as oral contraceptives)?
- Is my history of having a pulmonary embolism important health information for my siblings or children to know?

8. **Finding the [right support](#), whether online, through your care team or in your community, can help you feel more confident.** This is important as you recover and navigate treatment and care decisions moving forward.