

*If you have
any questions,
please ask your
physician or
nurse.*

Thoracentesis

A thoracentesis is done to drain excess fluid found between the lungs and the chest wall (pleural space). A small amount of fluid is always present in this space. In some cases, too much pleural fluid is produced. It may be caused by:

- Infection
- Heart failure
- Tumor

The build-up of this fluid puts pressure on the lung and may cause shortness of breath. A thoracentesis helps to:

- Relieve pain or shortness of breath
- Identify the cause of fluid build-up

The procedure takes about 30 to 45 minutes and may be done as an outpatient in the Interventional Radiology (IR) Department. If you are in the hospital, it may also be done in your room. A thoracentesis may be done by a physician, a physician assistant (PA) or an advanced practice nurse (APN).

Before the procedure

Outpatients

Come to the 4th floor of the Feinberg Pavilion, 251 East Huron Street, 1 hour before your procedure. Check in with the receptionist. Parking is available for patients and visitors in the garage at 222 East Huron Street, across from the Feinberg and Galter pavilions. For discounted rates, please bring your parking ticket with you. Tickets can be validated at the Customer Service desk on the 1st or 2nd floor of the Feinberg and Galter pavilions.

When you arrive at IR, a staff member will bring you and 1 family member to the exam room. Here they will review your health history, medicines and allergies.

Tell your physician:

- If you have any allergies
- If you are taking any prescription, over-the-counter or herbal medicines
- If you are taking blood-thinning medicines or have bleeding problems
- If you are or may be pregnant
- About past lung surgery or chronic lung disease, such as emphysema

You may need to have blood tests to check your blood clotting level. An X-ray and/or ultrasound of your chest will be done to locate the area of fluid to be drained.

All patients

After reviewing the procedure and answering any questions you may have, you will be asked to sign a written consent.

During the procedure

A nurse or technologist will help you sit on the side of the bed and lean forward with your arms resting on a table. A pillow may be used under your arms for comfort. It is important that you do not move, cough or breathe deeply during the procedure.

The area where the needle will be inserted will be cleaned with a special soap that may feel cold. An anesthetic (numbing medicine) will be injected into the area. This will sting for a few seconds. Once the area is numb, a needle will be inserted into your back between the ribs. You may feel pressure as the needle is inserted. Then, the needle will be connected to a syringe or a tube attached to a collection bag.

After the fluid is drained from your chest, the needle will be removed and a Band-Aid® will be placed over the site. You may have soreness over the site.

After the procedure

All patients

A chest X-ray will be done to check that the fluid has been removed and that your lung is fully inflated.

Tell your nurse if you have any of the following:

- Increased shortness of breath
- Pain when taking a breath

If ordered by your physician, the fluid will be sent to the lab for testing. It can take a few days to have results. Your primary physician will talk with you about treatment options based on the test results.

Outpatients

If you are going home after the procedure, you may resume normal diet and activities. Do not shower or bathe until the next day. At that time, you may remove the Band-Aid.

Ask your physician for guidelines about when you may drive and return to work. Be sure to keep all follow-up appointments.

Call your physician or nurse right away if you have any of the following:

- Sudden or increasing shortness of breath
- A fever of 100.5 degrees F or greater
- Increased pain when taking a breath
- Bleeding or drainage from the puncture site

Northwestern Medicine – Health Information Resources

For more information, contact Northwestern Memorial Hospital’s Alberto Culver Health Learning Center (HLC) at hlc@nm.org, or by calling 312.926.5465. Health information professionals can help you find the information you need and provide you with personal support at no charge.

For more information about Northwestern Medicine, please visit our website at nm.org.

Para asistencia en español, por favor llamar al Departamento de Representantes para Pacientes al 312.926.3112.

The entities that come together as Northwestern Medicine are committed to representing the communities we serve, fostering a culture of inclusion, delivering culturally competent care, providing access to treatment and programs in a nondiscriminatory manner and eliminating healthcare disparities. For questions, please call either Northwestern Memorial Hospital’s Patient Representatives Department at 312.926.3112, TDD/TTY 312.926.6363 or the Northwestern Medical Group Patient Representatives Department at 312.695.1100, TDD/TTY 312.926.6363.

Developed by: NMH Interventional Radiology and Oncology Nursing