Pleural Effusion

What is a pleural effusion?

Pleural effusion (PLUR-al ef-YOO-shun) is when fluid collects in the tissue between your lungs and the wall of your chest.

What causes it?

Pleural effusion can be caused by many different diseases. The most common causes are congestive heart failure, pneumonia, pulmonary embolism (a blood clot in the lung), or cancer.

What are the symptoms?

You might not have any symptoms, or you might feel short of breath, have a cough, or feel pain when you take a deep breath.

How can my doctor tell if I have it?

You may need a chest x-ray or CT scan. Based on your symptoms and the size of the effusion, your doctor may be able to tell what's causing it. If not, you might need a procedure called a thoracentesis (THOR-ah-sen-TEE-sis). Your doctor will put a needle into your chest to drain some of the fluid out. Then the fluid is tested to find out what's causing the pleural effusion.

How is it treated?

If you don't have any symptoms, your doctor might decide to wait and see if it goes away. But if you have symptoms, or if the cause isn't known, it may need to be drained. Your doctor will treat the cause of the effusion to try to prevent it from returning.

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