

[Home](#) > [Navigating Cancer Care](#) > [Side Effects](#) > Fluid Around the Lungs or Malignant Pleural Effusion

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Fluid Around the Lungs or Malignant Pleural Effusion [1]

This section has been reviewed and approved by the [Cancer.Net Editorial Board](#) [2], 09/2014

A pleural effusion is a buildup of extra fluid in the pleural space, which is the space between the lungs and the chest wall. About half of people with cancer develop a pleural effusion. Cancer growing in the pleural space causes a malignant pleural effusion. More than 75% of people with a malignant pleural effusion have lymphoma or cancers of the breast, lung, or ovary. This condition is considered a sign of metastatic cancer, or cancer that has spread to other areas of the body. Although a malignant pleural effusion is treatable, it can be a serious, potentially life-threatening condition.

Symptoms

Relieving side effects?also called symptom management, [palliative care](#) [3], or supportive care?is an important part of cancer care and treatment. Talk with your health care team about any symptoms you experience, including any new symptoms or a change in symptoms.

People with a pleural effusion may experience the following symptoms:

- [Shortness of breath](#) [4]
- Dry cough
- [Pain](#) [5]
- Feeling of chest heaviness or tightness
- Inability to lie flat
- Inability to exercise
- Generally feeling unwell

Diagnosis

The following tests may help diagnose a malignant pleural effusion, find the exact location of the pleural effusion, or plan treatment:

- A physical examination
- A chest x-ray, which is a picture of the inside of the body that shows the buildup of fluid
- [Computed tomography \(CT or CAT\)](#) [6], which is an imaging test that creates a three-dimensional picture of the inside of the body with an x-ray machine

- [Ultrasound](#) [7], an imaging test that uses sound waves to create a picture of the inside of the body
- Thoracentesis, which is the removal and analysis of fluid from the pleural cavity with a needle

Treatment

A pleural effusion often requires treatment in a hospital or clinic. The most common treatment is to drain the malignant pleural fluid. This may be done in several ways:

- Thoracentesis (see above)
- Tube thoracostomy, which uses a tube inserted into the chest for about 24 hours to drain the fluid. This is usually followed by pleurodesis, which is a process that uses substances, such as talc, to try to get the edge of the lung to stick to the chest wall to decrease the chance of the fluid returning.
- The insertion of a small tube, called a [catheter](#) [8], placed temporarily into the pleural space that allows you or your family member to drain the fluid into a bottle as needed or directed.
- The insertion of a shunt, which is a device used to bypass or divert fluid from one place to another to drain excess fluid.
- Treatment of the cancer with [chemotherapy](#) [9] to prevent the effusion from returning.

More Information

[Side Effects](#) [10]

[Advanced Cancer Care Planning](#) [11]

Additional Resource

[National Cancer Institute: Malignant Pleural Effusion](#) [12]

Links:

[1] <http://www.cancer.net/navigating-cancer-care/side-effects/fluid-around-lungs-or-malignant-pleural-effusion>

[2] <http://www.cancer.net/about-us>

[3] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25282>

[4] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25055>

[5] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25259>

[6] <http://www.cancer.net/node/24486>

[7] <http://www.cancer.net/node/24714>

[8] <http://www.cancer.net/node/24463>

[9] <http://www.cancer.net/node/24723>

[10] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25238>

[11] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25113>

[12] <http://www.cancer.gov/cancertopics/pdq/supportivecare/cardiopulmonary/Patient/page4>