Pneumothorax

In your lungs, the pressure is greater than in the pleural space (two-ply layer of tissue) around your lungs. When air gets in the pleural space, the pressure changes. The pressure in the pleural space then becomes greater than the pressure in your lung. This makes your lung collapse partly or completely. This is called a pneumothorax. There are two types of pneumothorax: spontaneous or traumatic.

Spontaneous pneumothorax happens suddenly or for an unknown reason. This is most common with:

- tall, thin men 20 to 40 years old
- people with emphysema, cystic fibrosis, and tuberculosis
- a small air sac or fluid-filled sac in your lung breaking
- activity such as running or weight lifting, scuba diving, or flying at high altitudes

Traumatic pneumothorax (tension) is caused by injury, chronic lung disease or from a problem during a medical procedure to your chest. When this occurs, air gets into your chest cavity, but it cannot get out.

Treatment

The doctor will freeze the skin where a tube will need to be inserted. This tube needs to go through your skin between your ribs all the way to your lung. This special tube will allow your lung to re-expand. A special attachment is connected to the tube in your chest called a Heimlich valve.

Home Treatment

- it usually it takes one to two weeks to get better
- stop smoking
- do not do any lifting or reaching (shoveling, vacuuming)
- take acetaminophen, ibuprofen, or the pain medication your doctor has prescribed - if unsure what to take for pain, ask your doctor or pharmacist
- do not get your bandage wet
- do not take your bandage off

Return to the emergency department RIGHT AWAY if:

- your Heimlich valve comes apart or your chest tube falls out
- you have bleeding from your chest tube site
- you are having a hard time breathing
- your pain gets worse
- you get the bandage that is covering your chest tube wet

March 2012