



*Better  
Together*

## Patient information

### Intercostal Chest Drain

Medical Division: Royal Liverpool Hospital  
and Broadgreen Hospital

PIF 1758 V1

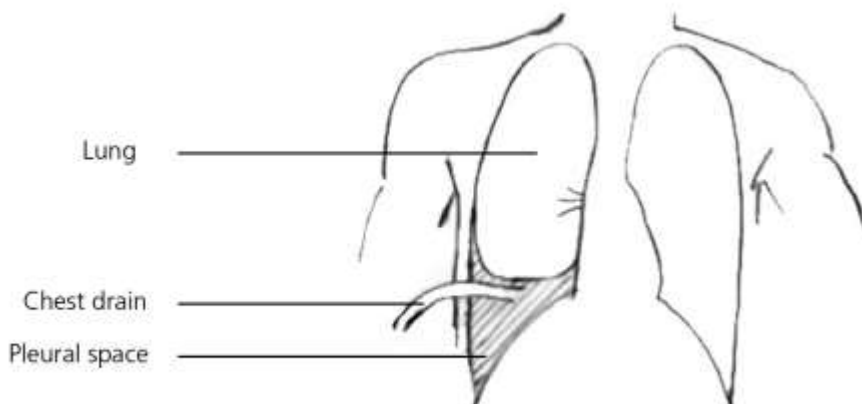
This leaflet explains why we use chest drains and what you can expect if you are having one put in. It also answers the most frequently asked questions about chest drains.

However, if you have any further questions, please do not hesitate to ask a member of your medical team.

Your doctor will explain why you need a drain and will also take your written consent to have the drain inserted.

### **What are chest drains for?**

A chest drain is a sterile plastic tube that allows us to drain the space between the lung and the chest wall. The medical name for this is the “**pleural space**”.



### **What needs to be drained?**

<b>We may need to drain</b>	<b>Medical name</b>
Air	Pneumothorax
Fluid	Pleural effusion
Blood	Haemothorax
Infection and/or pus	Empyema

## **What happens next if I need a drain?**

The doctor will decide where to place the drain. This is usually the side of your chest just underneath the armpit. The doctor may use an ultrasound machine to show where best to place the drain.

Ultrasound enables the doctor to 'look' through the chest wall. It is painless and non-invasive. A cool gel is used on the skin to ensure good contact for the ultrasound tip.

You will have an injection of local anaesthetic to make the area where the drain will be inserted numb (anaesthetised). This can sometimes sting. You may also be given pain killers.

## **Will it hurt, what should I expect when the drain is inserted and how long will it take?**

The anaesthetic injection and/or painkillers will prevent pain. However, if at any time during the procedure you do feel pain, please tell the doctor.

The doctor will explain how they would like you to sit, or lie, whilst the procedure takes place.

The doctor will wear sterile gloves and a gown and your skin will be cleaned with an antiseptic to help reduce the risk of infection. You may be partly covered in a sterile sheet.

The drain will then be inserted between the ribs in the anaesthetised area and connected to a tube and drainage bottle containing water. The water acts as a one way seal to prevent air or fluid to drain out and not go back into your chest.

The whole procedure usually takes about 20-30 minutes

## **Who will put my drain in?**

Your drain will be put in on the ward by an appropriately qualified and experienced doctor. Sometimes a qualified trainee doctor will insert the drain, but they will always be supervised by a doctor who is already fully trained in the procedure.

## **How will the drain be attached?**

We use both a stitch, to tie the drain in, and adhesive dressing on the skin. However, please move carefully as drains can still be pulled out.

## **How long will the drain be in?**

It depends on why you need the drain. However, your medical team will keep you informed on a regular basis. You may need several X-rays during this time to check progress.

## **How will the drain be removed?**

This is straightforward and is usually done by a nurse. Once all the dressings are removed, the drain is pulled out gently. You may be asked to hold your breath in a special way when this is done. It can be uncomfortable but only lasts a few seconds.

## **Can anything go wrong?**

There is a small risk of infection and bleeding but every effort is made to prevent this from happening.

Rarely, there is a risk of injury to other organs near your lungs. However every effort is made to prevent these complications from happening.

Air can also sometimes leak into the pleural space during the procedure but this is not usually a problem and it will usually come out when the drain is in place.

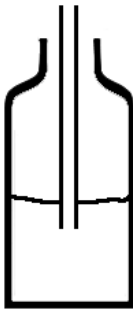
## Important things to know about your chest drain

- You may see air bubbling out through the bottle. This is normal. Fluid may also drain from the chest. This is usually clear but sometimes may be blood stained. This is nothing to be alarmed about.
- There is no need for you to be in pain. If you are in pain ask for painkillers.
- The drain can come out if pulled or twisted so please take care. If the drain does come out tell someone straight away.
- You need to keep the drainage bottle below the level of the drain (at the point it enters the chest). Usually it is placed on the floor.
- If you feel more breathless, please tell the nursing staff.

The drainage bottle contains water which acts as a „seal“ to prevent air leaking back up the drain into the pleural space.

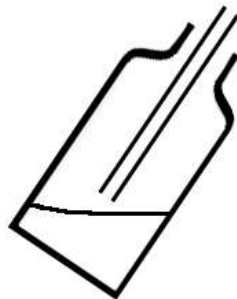
It is essential therefore that the bottle is kept upright at all times with the tube below the water surface.

**Correct**



Bottle upright and  
the tube tip is under  
the water

**Incorrect**



Bottle is tipped and  
the tube tip is not  
under the water

Your drain may require „flushing“ with sterile water to stop it from blocking. If this is needed it will be done by the nursing staff and is not painful.

### **What happens after the drain has been removed?**

You may have a stitch left in which is usually removed after seven days. Some people have a little pain after the drain has been removed which may be helped by painkillers.

If you have a lot of pain, difficulty breathing, or fever please tell a doctor or nurse so they can look for a cause and treat it.

### **Further information**

**For further information please speak to the nurse or doctor in charge of your care.**

**A further source of information is:**

**The British Lung Foundation**

**73-75 Goswell Road**

**London**

**EC1 7ER**

**BLF Helpline Monday to Friday 9.00am - 5.00pm**

**Tel: 03000 030 555**

**Text Phone: 18001 03000 030 555**

**[www.blf.org.uk](http://www.blf.org.uk)**

# Author: Medical Division – Royal Liverpool Hospital and Broadgreen Hospital

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