Caring for Your Heimlich Valve and Chest Tube

This information will help you care for your Heimlich valve and chest tube when you leave the hospital.

About Your Heimlich Valve and Chest Tube

Your chest tube is a hollow flexible tube placed between your ribs and into the space between the inner and outer linings of your lungs, which is called the pleural space. Your Heimlich valve is a one-way valve that connects to your chest tube (see Figure 1). The valve lets extra air and fluid out of your chest, allowing your lung to fully expand. You may go home with a Heimlich valve if your lung is still leaking air after your surgery.

Figure 1. Heimlich valve and chest tube

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- Your chest tube will be covered with a bandage. Change your
bandage every 7 days. Clean the skin around your chest tube with soap and water before applying the new bandage.

- If your bandage is wet, soiled, has come loose, or started to lift from your skin, apply a new one.

- If your chest tube is draining fluid, your Heimlich valve will be connected to either a plastic container or a drainage bag. The type of collection device used will depend on how much fluid is draining.
  
  - If your Heimlich valve is connected to a small plastic container, write down the amount in the container and empty it into the toilet.

  - If your Heimlich valve is connected to a drainage bag, your doctor may want you to measure the amount of fluid that is draining. Write down the amount and empty the bag into the toilet. To remove the fluid, open the valve at the bottom of the drainage bag and pour it into the toilet.

- The chest tube may irritate your chest wall, causing you some discomfort. Your doctor can prescribe pain medication, if you need it.

**Showering with your Heimlich valve**

You may take showers but you will need to keep your bandage dry. A hand-held showerhead can help direct the water away from your bandage. You will also need to cover your bandage. If the bandage gets wet, you will need to change it. Wet bandages are a common cause of skin problems.
Fixing a disconnected Heimlich valve
The Heimlich valve should never be disconnected from your chest tube. If it becomes disconnected, follow these steps:

1. Reconnect it immediately by inserting the blue end of the valve into your chest tube.

2. Cough deeply. This will help get rid of any extra air that may have built up in your pleural space while disconnecting your Heimlich valve.

3. Call your doctor’s office.

Call Your Doctor or Nurse if:

- You have a temperature of 101° F (38.3° C) or higher
- Your skin around the chest tube is red, puffy, or feels warm and painful when you touch it
- You have pain that is not relieved by your pain medication
- The amount of drainage from the chest tube increases
If you have any questions, contact a member of your healthcare team directly. If you're a patient at MSK and you need to reach a provider after 5:00 PM, during the weekend, or on a holiday, call 212-639-2000.

For more resources, visit www.mskcc.org/pe to search our virtual library.