



Your Heimlich Valve

Caring for your chest tube at home

This handout describes how to care for your Heimlich valve at home.

You are ready to go home, but you still need a chest tube. A chest tube is a drain that helps remove air or fluid from your lung (*pleural space*). Your doctor has recommended a type of chest tube called a *Heimlich valve*. This type is used when there is only a small amount of drainage or a small *pneumothorax* (air leak) in your lung.

Heimlich valves are 1-way valves. Fluid, clots, or air can leave the lung but cannot get back in through the valve. A Heimlich valve is small, lightweight, safe, and easy to care for.

The valve is attached to your chest tube drain and secured tightly. There is a collection container with an opening attached to the other end of the valve. This container collects any drainage you may have.

Caring for Your Heimlich Valve

When the valve is working correctly:

- You will hear air flow from the valve and see the valve fluttering.
- There is a tight seal between the chest tube drain and the Heimlich connection.
- There are no kinks in the tubing. (Think of a garden hose, that water won't flow through when it is kinked.)
- Nothing is pressing on the Heimlich valve or blocking the outflow of air or drainage. The airflow should be steady.

What to check:

- If you have shortness of breath or chest discomfort, check the connections. Make sure they are not damaged and there are no kinks in the tube. If symptoms do not improve, call your doctor or seek medical assistance right away.

Questions?

Your questions are important. Call your doctor or health care provider if you have questions or concerns. UWMC clinic staff are also available to help at any time.

Weekdays:

Call the Surgical Specialties Advice Line at 206-598-4549, 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.

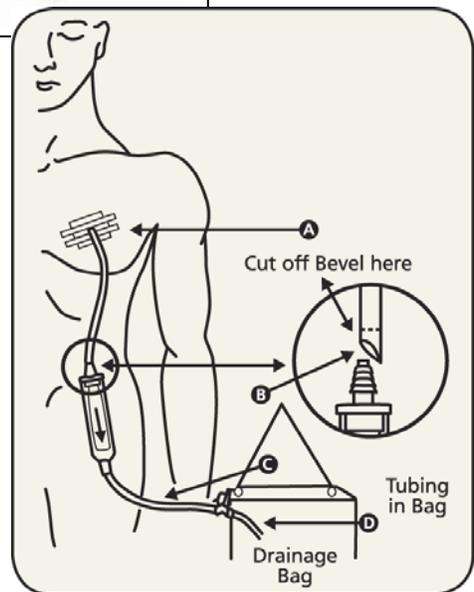
Weekends, holidays, or after hours:

Call the paging operator at 206-598-6190 and ask to speak with the Thoracic Surgery doctor on call.

- Check your incision every day for signs of infection. These include fever above 101°F, swelling, pus, and the incision being warm or hot to the touch. If you think your incision might be infected, call your doctor right away.
- Change the dressing around your chest tube every 48 hours, or sooner if needed. You may need to buy supplies for dressing changes at your local pharmacy.
- Empty drainage from your collection container into your toilet or sink.
- Your nurse will explain how to take a shower when you have a Heimlich chest tube. You should be able to demonstrate this before you are discharged from the hospital.
- Your nurse will also talk with you about the follow-up care you should receive after you go home. This care will include taking antibiotics, a clinic visit within 1 week, and a chest X-ray.



Heimlich chest drain valve.



Chest drainage assembly.

Illustrations courtesy of © Becton, Dickinson and Company

UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON
MEDICAL CENTER
UW Medicine

Thoracic Surgery/5-Northeast

Box 356087

1959 N.E. Pacific St. Seattle, WA 98195
206-598-4500