

Pleural Effusion

USC Pulmonary Clinic

What is it? A pleural effusion is an abnormal collection of fluid between the two layers of tissue that line the lungs. There is normally a very small amount of fluid present to help lubricate the tissue. If too much fluid is made, patients may become short of breath or have pain.

What are the symptoms? This varies based on the size and cause of the effusion. Common symptoms include shortness of breath, chest pain or cough.

What causes it? There are many possible causes. Congestive heart failure, kidney failure, infections, medications, cancers and injury to vessels from trauma are the most common.

How do we determine the cause? Your doctor will likely order a procedure called a thoracentesis. This is when a needle is placed in the fluid

collection and a sample is removed. Sometimes, this will have to be done several times to find the cause. See our information sheet "Thoracentesis".

What is the treatment? The treatment will depend on what is causing the fluid to accumulate. Usually, treating the underlying cause (i.e. lasix for heart failure, antibiotics and drainage for infection) fixes the problem. Some times more aggressive measures are needed. Your doctor will explain his/her plan when you discuss the results.

