Atelectasis

Atelectasis is when part or all of a lung does not expand the way it should. It is also known as a collapsed lung. When you breathe in, the lungs normally expand to fill with air. With atelectasis, a blockage in or pressure around the lung keeps the lung from expanding. This causes trouble breathing, coughing, and chest pain. Read on to learn more about atelectasis and how it can be treated.

What Causes Atelectasis?

Atelectasis is caused by a blocked airway, or from pressure from outside the lung. Some things that may lead to atelectasis include:

- A foreign object stuck in an airway
- Mucus that blocks an airway
- Certain lung diseases
- Fluid or air buildup in the space around the lung
- Lying in one position for a long period
- Having anesthesia (medication that keeps you from feeling pain)
- A tumor in an airway

How Is Atelectasis Diagnosed?

You may have one or more of the following tests:

- Blood tests check the level of oxygen and other gases in the blood.
- Chest x-rays take pictures of the lung.
- A CT scan takes detailed pictures of the lung using x-rays and computer scans.
- Bronchoscopy uses a special viewing scope to look inside the lung. A sample of a blockage can be taken and tested. The blockage can also be removed.

How Is Atelectasis Treated?

Treating the underlying cause often allows the lung to re-expand. Pneumonia (a serious lung infection) often occurs when the lung collapses. In order to help the lung tissue re-expand and prevent pneumonia, the following treatments may be prescribed:

- Chest percussion to loosen mucus and help prevent pneumonia. It involves clapping on the chest with a cupped hand.
- Postural drainage to help drain mucus from the lungs. It requires lying in certain positions for a given amount of time.
- Deep breathing exercises to help expand the lungs and clear mucus. They also help prevent pneumonia.
- Inhaled medications to open up the airway. If infection is present, antibiotics may also be given.

Call the healthcare provider right away if you have any of the following:
• Symptoms that get worse, or new symptoms
• Sudden, sharp chest pain, which may spread to your shoulder or back
• A bluish color to the skin
• Feeling faint or fainting
• Fever of 100.4°F or higher
• Cough (either dry or producing thick mucus)
• Wheezing or fast breathing
• Tiredness
• Muscle pain
• Headache