When you need a CT scan to check for a blood clot in your lungs

When you came into the emergency department (ED), you had symptoms that prompted your doctor to check for a pulmonary embolism. That’s a blood clot in your lungs. If you have one, you need help right away.

If you have a blood clot in your lungs, you may have:

- Chest pain that gets worse when you take deep breaths
- Shortness of breath
- Swollen legs

You may also cough up blood.

You are more likely to have a blood clot in your lungs if you:

- Are over age 50
- Use birth control that contains hormones

You are also more likely to have a blood clot if you:

- A fast heartbeat
- Been injured or had surgery in the last four weeks
- Had blood clots before
- Signs of heart strain (Your doctor can check for this with a simple, painless test called an EKG.)

If you have most of these signs and risk factors, you may have a blood clot in your lungs. In that case, it may be wise to have a CT scan.

If you have just some of these signs and risk factors, or your doctor thinks you are unlikely to have a blood clot, the doctor may order a D-dimer. This blood test looks for signs that your body is trying to dissolve a blood clot.

You may need a CT scan if the D-dimer shows that you may have a blood clot. You may also need one if your doctor is concerned about any of your test results. But it may not be the first test you should have.