

Pulmonary Edema

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THE STORY IN ONE SENTENCE

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“Pulmonary edema (fluid flooding the lungs) is when fluid leaks into the tiny air sacs of the lungs, blocking oxygen from reaching the blood.”

Normal anatomy — the body's job

The lungs have three main parts: the airways (pipes that carry air in and out), the alveoli (millions of tiny air sacs where oxygen enters the blood and carbon dioxide leaves), and the pulmonary capillaries (ultra-thin blood vessels wrapped around each sac). Gas exchange — oxygen in, carbon dioxide out — happens at the alveolar-capillary membrane, a wall so thin that gases slip across in less than a second. At rest you use only part of your lung capacity; under stress (exercise, illness) you have reserve air sacs and extra blood flow to call on, which is why early lung trouble is subtle and late trouble is obvious.

BODY'S JOB

The lungs run gas exchange every single breath: fresh air fills the alveoli, oxygen crosses the membrane into the blood in the capillaries, and carbon dioxide crosses back out to be exhaled. The heart's right side pumps low-oxygen blood to the lungs, and the left side pumps freshly oxygenated blood to the rest of the body. The alveolar-capillary membrane stays dry because pressure in the capillaries is normally low (about 8–12 mm Hg), so fluid stays inside the vessels and does not leak out. Understanding that dry, low-pressure steady state is how you spot what has gone wrong.

1. Right heart pumps blood → pulmonary arteries → capillaries wrapped around each alveolus.

2. You breathe in → air fills alveoli → oxygen slips across the thin membrane into capillary blood.
3. Carbon dioxide slips from blood → into alveoli → you breathe it out.
4. Oxygenated blood flows → pulmonary veins → left heart → pumped to body.
5. The membrane stays dry because capillary pressure is low and lymphatic vessels drain any tiny leak before it pools.

What breaks

In pulmonary edema (fluid flooding the lungs), fluid that normally stays locked inside the blood vessels leaks out and floods the air sacs. The leak happens for two big reasons: either pressure in the capillaries shoots up so high that fluid is forced out (like a garden hose with too much pressure spraying through a crack), or the capillary walls themselves are damaged and become leaky (like a screen door with holes punched in it). Once fluid fills the alveoli, oxygen cannot cross from air into blood, so the patient suffocates even though they are breathing. Every finding — the gasping, the crackles, the pink frothy spit, the low oxygen — traces back to that one broken step: flooded air sacs.

CLINICAL TERM

Pulmonary edema (fluid flooding the lungs) is classified as cardiogenic (heart failure drives up pulmonary venous and capillary pressure above ~18-20 mm Hg, forcing fluid out) or non-cardiogenic (direct injury to the alveolar-capillary membrane increases permeability, as seen in ARDS, sepsis, aspiration, or toxin exposure). Both pathways flood the alveoli, but the mechanism and treatment differ: cardiogenic swelling (edema) responds to diuretics and afterload reduction; non-cardiogenic swelling requires treatment of the underlying cause and supportive ventilation.

How the body compensates

The body's first responses to flooded lungs are meant to protect you — breathing faster to pull in more oxygen, the heart racing to pump harder, and stress hormones tightening blood vessels to keep blood pressure up. Those same changes cause new trouble if the swelling (edema) stays: faster breathing exhausts the breathing muscles, higher heart rate strains an already

weak heart, and tighter vessels raise the pressure even more, forcing out more fluid. Reading the pattern of compensation tells you how close the patient is to breaking down.

1. **Fast breathing (Tachypnea) (fast breathing):** The body senses low oxygen and rising carbon dioxide, so the brainstem's respiratory centers ramp up breathing rate to 25, 30, even 40 breaths per minute. This pulls in more air and tries to restore oxygen — but it also exhausts the diaphragm and intercostal muscles (the muscles between the ribs), setting up respiratory failure.
2. **A fast heart rate (Tachycardia) (fast heart rate):** The sympathetic nervous system (the body's gas pedal) floods the bloodstream with adrenaline to speed the heart and squeeze blood vessels, trying to deliver what little oxygen is in the blood faster. This raises oxygen demand in the heart muscle itself, worsening starved blood flow (ischemia) (lack of blood flow) if the heart is already weak.
3. **Increased work of breathing:** The patient sits upright, uses neck and shoulder muscles to breathe, and flares the nostrils. The alveoli are stiff and wet, so each breath takes much more effort. If the work becomes unsustainable, the patient fatigues and stops breathing effectively (respiratory arrest).
4. **Pulmonary vasoconstriction:** Low oxygen in flooded alveoli triggers the blood vessels nearby to clamp down (hypoxic pulmonary vasoconstriction), trying to shunt blood to healthier parts of the lung. This raises pressure in the pulmonary artery, straining the right heart and worsening the backup if it goes on too long (acute cor pulmonale).
5. **Neurohormonal activation:** The kidneys release renin, starting a cascade that produces angiotensin II (a powerful vessel-tightener) and aldosterone (a hormone that tells the kidneys to hold onto salt and water). This was meant to support blood pressure in shock, but in pulmonary edema (fluid flooding the lungs) it adds more fluid and raises the pressure forcing fluid out, creating a vicious cycle.

Domino effect

1. **A broken step — weak left ventricle, sudden with high blood pressure (hypertensive) crisis, leaky mitral valve, kidney failure, or direct lung injury — starts the leak. —** In cardiogenic swelling (edema), the left ventricle cannot pump blood forward, so pressure backs up through the left atrium into the pulmonary veins and capillaries, climbing above the normal 8–12 mm Hg to 20, 25, even 30 mm Hg or higher. The high pressure forces fluid out of the capillaries into the interstitial space (the tissue around the alveoli) and then into the alveoli themselves. In non-cardiogenic swelling, inflammation punches holes in the capillary membrane, and protein-rich fluid pours out even at normal pressure.

2. Fluid floods the alveoli, and gas exchange collapses. — Oxygen cannot cross a layer of water. The flooded alveoli are blocked, so oxygen from each breath never reaches the blood and the patient becomes hypoxemic (low blood oxygen). Carbon dioxide starts to build up if enough alveoli are out of service. The patient gasps, the lips and skin turn blue (cyanosis), and pink frothy coughed-up mucus (sputum) may bubble up as air churns the fluid in the airways.
3. The body's alarm systems fire: breathing speeds up, heart races, blood vessels tighten. — Chemoreceptors in the carotid arteries and brainstem sense low oxygen and high carbon dioxide and trigger the respiratory centers in the medulla (the part of the brainstem that controls breathing) to increase the breathing rate. The sympathetic nervous system releases norepinephrine and epinephrine (adrenaline-type stress hormones) to speed the heart, raise blood pressure, and shunt blood to vital organs. These responses buy minutes of time but cost energy and strain the system further.
4. The extra work of breathing and the heart's strain push the patient toward failure. — Breathing through wet, stiff lungs is like trying to inflate a soaked sponge. The diaphragm and accessory muscles fatigue. If the patient cannot keep up the work, carbon dioxide climbs (hypercapnia), consciousness drops, and respiratory arrest follows. The racing, straining heart consumes more oxygen and may tip into starved blood flow (ischemia) or arrhythmia (dangerous irregular rhythm), especially if coronary arteries are already narrowed.
5. If the flood is not reversed, multi-organ consequences follow. — Prolonged low oxygen damages the brain (confusion, seizures, coma), kidneys (acute kidney injury from poor blood flow (perfusion) and sometimes from the diuretics used to treat the swelling (edema)), liver, and gut. The right ventricle, forced to pump against high pressure in the flooded lung circulation, can fail (acute right heart failure). Lactic acid builds up in oxygen-starved tissues (lactic too much acid in the blood (acidosis)), and the patient may go into shock.
6. Treatment stage determines survival: early intervention reverses the flood; late intervention fights to keep the patient alive while the lungs recover. — In early cardiogenic pulmonary edema (fluid flooding the lungs), intravenous diuretics (furosemide) pull fluid out through the kidneys, nitroglycerin or other vasodilators lower the pressure forcing fluid into the lungs, and supplemental oxygen or non-invasive positive pressure (CPAP or BiPAP) keeps oxygen levels safe while the drugs work. Catching it here often reverses the crisis in hours. In late or severe swelling (edema), the patient may need intubation and mechanical ventilation to take over the work of breathing, and the team must manage complications — arrhythmias, kidney injury, shock — while protecting what organ function is left. The earlier the catch, the simpler and more successful the save.

Symptoms · what the patient feels, and why

- Shortness of breath that gets worse when lying flat: Fluid from the lungs' tiny blood vessels leaks into the air sacs (the alveoli, where oxygen moves into the blood), so less space is left for air. When you lie down, gravity lets even more fluid spread across the lungs, making it harder to breathe.
- Pink, frothy coughed-up mucus (sputum) when coughing: The leaked fluid mixes with air and a little blood from damaged capillaries (the smallest blood vessels in the lungs), creating pink foam that comes up when you cough.
- Fast, shallow breathing: The brain's breathing center (in the brainstem) senses low oxygen and rising carbon dioxide, so it tells the lungs to breathe faster and work harder to get more oxygen in and waste gas out.
- Crackling sounds (rales) heard through a stethoscope at the base of the lungs: Fluid in the alveoli pops and crackles as air moves through it during each breath, like the sound of Rice Krispies in milk.
- Anxiety or a feeling of panic: Low oxygen in the blood triggers the amygdala (the brain's alarm center) and releases adrenaline (the fight-or-flight hormone), making you feel scared or restless because your body knows something is wrong.
- Cold, clammy, pale or bluish skin: The body shunts blood away from the skin to protect the heart and brain, and low oxygen in the blood turns it darker, so skin looks pale or blue (cyanosis, especially around the lips and fingertips).
- Rapid heart rate: The heart pumps faster to try to deliver more oxygen-carrying blood to the body's tissues, because each liter of blood is carrying less oxygen than normal.
- Swelling in the legs or abdomen: If the right side of the heart is also struggling (often because high pressure in the lungs pushes back on it), blood backs up into the veins, and fluid leaks out into the tissues, causing swelling (edema) in the feet, ankles, or belly.

Focused exam

- Listen to both lungs with a stethoscope for crackles (wet, popping sounds) that start at the bottom and move up as fluid spreads: Crackles mean fluid is sitting inside the tiny air sacs (alveoli), blocking oxygen from getting into the blood. More crackles mean more fluid and more trouble breathing.
- Check breathing rate, oxygen level (SpO₂), and whether the patient is using neck or belly muscles to breathe: Fast, shallow breaths and low oxygen (SpO₂ below 90%) signal the lungs cannot do their job. If the patient is using extra muscles to breathe, they are running out of energy and may need a breathing machine soon.

- Press gently on both ankles and shins to look for pitting swelling (edema) (when your finger leaves a dent that stays for a few seconds): Swollen legs mean fluid is backing up in the body, often because the heart is not pumping well enough. When both the legs and lungs are swollen, it points to heart failure as the root cause.
- Ask if the patient wakes up short of breath at night, needs to sleep propped up on pillows, or has sudden attacks of breathlessness when lying flat: When you lie flat, fluid that pooled in the legs during the day shifts into the chest and floods the lungs. This overnight breathing trouble (called breathlessness when lying flat (orthopnea) or paroxysmal nocturnal trouble breathing (dyspnea)) is a hallmark of pulmonary edema (fluid flooding the lungs) from heart failure.
- Listen to the heart for a gallop rhythm (an extra sound, like da-dum-dum instead of da-dum) and check for a fast or irregular pulse: A gallop rhythm (S3 heart sound) means the heart is overfilled and stiff, often seen in heart failure. A fast or irregular heartbeat can worsen fluid backup by preventing the heart from pumping efficiently.
- Look at skin color and capillary refill (press a fingernail and watch how fast pink color returns): Pale or blue-tinged skin and slow capillary refill (longer than 2 seconds) mean oxygen is not reaching the tissues well, either because the lungs are flooded or the heart is not pushing blood forward.

Diagnostics · every test answers a question

- Chest X-ray (portable or upright PA view) → Is there fluid in the lungs, and does the pattern point to heart failure or infection?
- Arterial blood gas (ABG) → Is the patient getting enough oxygen, and is carbon dioxide building up dangerously?
- B-type natriuretic peptide (BNP or NT-proBNP) → Is the heart stretched and struggling, or is shortness of breath from something else like asthma or pneumonia?
- Troponin I or T → Is a heart attack (myocardial tissue death from blocked blood flow (infarction)) triggering the pulmonary edema (fluid flooding the lungs)?
- Basic metabolic panel (BMP) including creatinine and electrolytes → Are the kidneys working well enough to handle diuretics, and are sodium and potassium safe?
- Complete blood count (CBC) → Is anemia or infection contributing to shortness of breath or triggering heart failure?
- Electrocardiogram (12-lead ECG) → Is there evidence of acute heart attack, dangerous arrhythmia, or long-standing heart strain?
- Bedside lung ultrasound → Can we see B-lines (vertical streaks) that confirm fluid in the lungs, especially when chest X-ray is delayed?

Treatment logic

- Sit the patient upright (at least 45 degrees) and give oxygen by nasal cannula or mask to target $\text{SpO}_2 \geq 90\%$ → Sitting up lets gravity pull fluid down and away from the lungs, opening more space for air. Extra oxygen helps molecules squeeze past the fluid layer in the alveoli and reach the bloodstream, easing suffocation right now.
- Give a loop diuretic (furosemide 20–40 mg IV, or higher doses if the patient has chronic kidney disease or takes diuretics at home) to pull fluid from the lungs into the blood, then out through urine → Loop diuretics block salt reabsorption in the kidneys, forcing them to dump water and sodium into the urine. This shrinks the fluid volume in the lungs within 30–60 minutes, clearing space for oxygen to cross into the blood.
- If systolic blood pressure is above 110 mmHg, give nitroglycerin (sublingual tablet or IV infusion starting at 5–10 mcg/min) to relax blood vessels and reduce the load on the heart → Nitroglycerin opens (dilates) veins and arteries, lowering the pressure the heart must pump against. Less back-pressure means less fluid is forced backward into the lungs. It also improves blood flow to the heart muscle itself, which helps if starved blood flow (ischemia) (low oxygen to the heart) is part of the problem.
- Identify and treat the root cause: perform ECG and troponin to rule out heart attack; check BNP for heart failure; measure creatinine for kidney failure; consider echocardiogram to assess heart pump function and valves → Fixing the underlying trigger stops new fluid from accumulating. If a heart attack is the cause, emergency catheterization and stenting restore blood flow. If uncontrolled high blood pressure is the trigger, lowering it with IV medications prevents further backup. If kidney failure is worsening fluid retention, dialysis may be needed.
- If the patient cannot maintain $\text{SpO}_2 \geq 90\%$ on high-flow oxygen, apply noninvasive positive pressure ventilation (CPAP at 5–10 cm H₂O or BiPAP) via face mask → Positive pressure pushes air past the fluid and forces collapsed alveoli open, improving oxygen delivery immediately. It reduces the work of breathing and buys time for diuretics to remove the fluid. CPAP/BiPAP can prevent the need for intubation and mechanical ventilation in many patients.
- Monitor urine output hourly (goal at least 0.5 mL/kg/hr), weigh the patient daily, and recheck creatinine and electrolytes every 12–24 hours to avoid over-diuresis and electrolyte imbalance → Tracking urine output and weight tells you if diuretics are working. Watching creatinine and potassium prevents kidney damage from dehydration and dangerous heart rhythms from low potassium. Adjust diuretic dose based on response, not a fixed schedule.

- If the patient is in cardiogenic shock (systolic BP < 90 mmHg, cold extremities, confusion) despite initial treatment, start an inotrope (dobutamine 2.5–10 mcg/kg/min IV) to strengthen heart contractions and improve forward blood flow → Inotropes increase the force of each heartbeat, pushing more blood out of the heart and reducing backup into the lungs. This raises blood pressure and improves oxygen delivery to organs. Used when the heart pump is so weak that diuretics and nitrates alone are not enough.

Medications

Furosemide (Lasix) · Loop diuretic (a water pill that works in the kidneys)

Furosemide makes the kidneys dump extra salt and water into the urine, which shrinks the total volume of fluid in the blood vessels. When there's less fluid pushing through the lungs' tiny blood vessels, less water leaks into the air sacs, so breathing gets easier fast.

1. Furosemide blocks a pump in the loop of Henle that normally grabs sodium (salt) and pulls it back into the blood.
2. When sodium stays in the kidney tube, water follows it (because water follows salt), so both pour into the bladder as urine.
3. The total volume of blood drops within 15–30 minutes.
4. Less fluid means lower pressure inside the lung's tiny vessels, so water stops flooding the air sacs.
5. The person can take deeper breaths and their oxygen level climbs.

SAFETY WATCH

Can wash out potassium, magnesium, and calcium in the urine, leading to dangerous heart rhythms or muscle cramps—labs must be checked. · May drop blood pressure too far, making the person dizzy or faint. · Can strain the kidneys if the person is already dehydrated or has weak kidneys to begin with. · Hearing loss (temporary or permanent ringing, muffled sound) if the dose is very high or pushed in too fast through an IV. · Watch urine output—if the kidneys shut down, furosemide won't work and can build up to toxic levels.

Nitroglycerin (IV or sublingual) · Nitrate vasodilator (a drug that relaxes blood vessel walls)

Nitroglycerin releases nitric oxide inside the smooth muscle cells that wrap around veins and arteries. Nitric oxide tells those muscles to relax, so the vessels widen. Wider veins mean less

blood returns to the heart, and wider arteries mean the heart doesn't have to push as hard—both lighten the heart's workload and drop the pressure flooding the lungs.

1. Nitroglycerin breaks down into nitric oxide inside the vessel wall's muscle cells.
2. Nitric oxide activates an enzyme (guanylate cyclase) that makes a molecule called cGMP.
3. cGMP tells the muscle cells to relax, so the vessel walls soften and widen.
4. Veins hold more blood in the arms and legs instead of sending it all back to the heart—this is called reducing preload.
5. The heart fills with less blood each beat, so it pumps less volume forward into the already-swamped lungs.
6. Pressure in the lung capillaries drops, water stops leaking into the air sacs, and the person can breathe.

SAFETY WATCH

Can drop blood pressure sharply—dangerous if the person already has low pressure or is dehydrated. · Causes pounding headaches (the brain's vessels widen too). · Tolerance builds fast if used continuously, so doctors often schedule nitrate-free intervals. · Never give with phosphodiesterase inhibitors (sildenafil, tadalafil for erectile dysfunction)—the combination can cause life-threatening blood pressure collapse. · Monitor blood pressure every few minutes when using the IV form.

Morphine sulfate (low-dose IV) · Opioid analgesic and anxiolytic (a pain and anxiety medicine)

Morphine binds to opioid receptors in the brain and blood vessels. In the brain, it calms the panic and air-hunger feeling that makes people gasp and thrash, which lowers the body's stress hormone surge. In the veins, it causes mild widening (vasodilation), which—like nitroglycerin—reduces the volume of blood returning to the heart and eases pressure in the lungs.

1. Morphine locks onto mu-opioid receptors in the brain's respiratory and emotional centers.
2. These receptors reduce the brain's alarm signals, so the person feels less panic and air hunger.
3. Lower anxiety means less adrenaline and cortisol (stress hormones) flooding the bloodstream.
4. Less adrenaline means the heart rate and blood pressure settle, and the heart's workload drops.
5. Morphine also gently relaxes the smooth muscle in veins, pooling blood in the limbs and belly instead of flooding back to the heart and lungs.

6. Together, the calmer brain and lighter heart load let the lungs catch up.

SAFETY WATCH

Can slow breathing dangerously—especially risky in COPD, sleep pauses in breathing (apnea), or if combined with benzodiazepines. · May drop blood pressure, particularly in people who are already volume-depleted. · Causes nausea and vomiting (give an antiemetic alongside). · Risk of dependence and respiratory arrest with repeated or high doses. · Use is declining—many centers now rely on non-opioid anxiolytics or skip this entirely, per AHA 2017 guidelines.

Oxygen (supplemental) · Medical gas / supportive therapy

Oxygen raises the percentage of oxygen molecules in each breath. Even though the air sacs are partly filled with water, flooding them with a higher concentration of oxygen pushes more oxygen molecules across the wet barrier and into the bloodstream, keeping vital organs fed until the fluid clears.

1. Room air is 21% oxygen; supplemental oxygen delivers anywhere from 24% up to 100%.
2. The higher oxygen percentage increases the gradient (the 'push') that drives oxygen across the wet alveolar wall.
3. More oxygen dissolves in the blood and binds to hemoglobin (the oxygen-carrying protein in red blood cells).
4. Organs—especially the brain and heart—receive enough oxygen to keep working even while the lungs are flooded.
5. This buys time for diuretics and vasodilators to pull the water out and drop the pressure.

SAFETY WATCH

Too much oxygen for too long can damage lung tissue (oxygen toxicity) and suppress the breathing drive in people with chronic CO₂ retention (advanced COPD). · Target oxygen saturation 92–96% in most patients; 88–92% in COPD with known CO₂ retention. · High-flow nasal cannula or non-invasive ventilation (BiPAP, CPAP) often work better than a simple mask because they also push fluid back into the capillaries with positive pressure. · If oxygen alone doesn't bring the saturation up, the person may need intubation and a mechanical ventilator.

Noninvasive positive-pressure ventilation (CPAP or BiPAP) · Mechanical respiratory support (not a drug, but a key therapy)

A tight-fitting mask blows air into the lungs under steady or cycling pressure. That pressure acts like an invisible hand pushing the water that leaked into the air sacs back across the

capillary wall and into the bloodstream, where the kidneys can then remove it. The pressure also props the alveoli open so they don't collapse under the weight of the fluid.

1. The mask delivers continuous positive airway pressure (CPAP) or bi-level pressure (BiPAP: higher on inhale, lower on exhale).
2. Positive pressure inside the alveoli opposes the hydrostatic pressure (fluid-pushing force) in the capillaries.
3. Water is squeezed back out of the air sacs and into the bloodstream.
4. The alveoli stay inflated instead of collapsing, so oxygen can cross even the sacs that still have some fluid.
5. Breathing becomes easier, oxygen levels climb, and the work of breathing drops—often avoiding the need for intubation.

SAFETY WATCH

Can cause stomach bloating (air pushed into the esophagus). · Risk of vomiting and aspiration if the person has a full stomach or altered mental status. · Skin breakdown on the nose and face from the tight mask. · Rarely, can cause a pneumothorax (collapsed lung) if pressure is too high. · Close monitoring required—if the person tires out or oxygen keeps dropping, move quickly to intubation.

Dobutamine or Milrinone (in cardiogenic shock with low output) · Inotrope (a drug that strengthens the heart's squeeze)

When the heart is so weak it can't pump enough blood forward—causing organs to shut down—dobutamine and milrinone force the heart muscle to contract harder. Dobutamine mimics adrenaline at beta-1 receptors on heart cells; milrinone blocks an enzyme (phosphodiesterase-3) that normally breaks down the 'squeeze' signal inside the cell. Both boost the calcium surge that powers each heartbeat, so the heart ejects more blood with each pump, relieving backward congestion into the lungs.

1. Dobutamine binds beta-1 receptors on the heart, turning on a cascade (cAMP pathway) that increases calcium release inside the muscle cell.
2. Milrinone blocks the enzyme that breaks down cAMP, so the 'squeeze' signal lasts longer.
3. More calcium means stronger, faster contractions (positive inotropy).
4. The left ventricle ejects a larger volume of blood forward into the aorta.
5. Less blood backs up into the left atrium and pulmonary veins, so lung pressure drops and fluid reabsorbs.
6. Cardiac output climbs, blood pressure may stabilize, and organs—including the kidneys—get better blood flow (perfusion) so diuretics can work.

SAFETY WATCH

Can trigger dangerous arrhythmias (fast, chaotic heartbeats) because they increase the heart's electrical irritability. · May raise oxygen demand in the heart muscle, worsening starved blood flow (ischemia) if coronary arteries are blocked. · Dobutamine can drop blood pressure by dilating peripheral arteries, sometimes requiring a second drug (norepinephrine) to keep pressure up. · Milrinone is cleared by the kidneys—dose must be cut in kidney failure or it will accumulate and cause toxicity. · Both are IV-only, short-term rescue drugs—never for chronic heart failure.

Vasopressin or Norepinephrine (in distributive shock with low SVR) · Vasopressor (a drug that tightens blood vessels to raise blood pressure)

When sepsis or another cause makes blood vessels leak and dilate, blood pressure crashes even though the total fluid volume is high. Vasopressors clamp down the vessel walls—norepinephrine through alpha-1 adrenergic receptors, vasopressin through V1 receptors—raising resistance and squeezing blood back toward the core. This restores pressure so the kidneys can filter and diuretics can pull out the extra water flooding the lungs.

1. Norepinephrine or vasopressin binds receptors on the smooth muscle wrapping around arterioles.
2. The receptors trigger calcium influx and muscle contraction, narrowing the vessel.
3. Systemic vascular resistance (SVR) climbs, which raises blood pressure.
4. Higher pressure improves blood flow (perfusion) to the kidneys, brain, and heart.
5. The kidneys begin filtering again, letting diuretics clear the fluid that leaked into the lungs.
6. Blood pressure stabilizes so the patient doesn't die of shock while the pulmonary edema (fluid flooding the lungs) is treated.

SAFETY WATCH

Can cause severe vasoconstriction in fingers, toes, and gut, leading to tissue death (gangrene, bowel starved blood flow (ischemia)) if doses are very high or prolonged. · May trigger arrhythmias. · Extravasation (IV leaks into tissue) causes skin tissue death (necrosis)—must run through a central line. · Raises the heart's workload and oxygen demand, which can worsen starved blood flow (ischemia). · Blood pressure must be monitored continuously with an arterial line in the ICU.

Antibiotics (in infection-triggered ARDS or sepsis) · Varies by pathogen (e.g., beta-lactam, fluoroquinolone, glycopeptide)

When bacteria invade the lungs or bloodstream, the immune system's inflammatory response can damage the alveolar-capillary barrier, causing non-cardiogenic pulmonary edema (fluid

flooding the lungs) (ARDS). Antibiotics kill the bacteria by breaking their cell walls, stopping protein synthesis, or blocking DNA replication. Once the infection is controlled, inflammation settles and the leaky barrier begins to heal, stopping further fluid leak.

1. Antibiotic reaches the infection site through the bloodstream.
2. Beta-lactams (penicillins, cephalosporins, carbapenems) punch holes in bacterial cell walls, bursting the bacteria.
3. Fluoroquinolones block bacterial DNA gyrase, stopping replication.
4. Macrolides and aminoglycosides jam the bacterial ribosome, halting protein production.
5. Bacteria die or stop multiplying.
6. The immune system's alarm signals (cytokines like TNF- α , IL-1, IL-6) drop as the pathogen load falls.
7. The alveolar-capillary barrier repairs itself, fluid leak stops, and reabsorption begins.

SAFETY WATCH

Allergic reactions—rash, anaphylaxis (especially penicillins, cephalosporins). · *C. difficile* colitis from killing normal gut bacteria. · Kidney injury (aminoglycosides, vancomycin) and hearing loss (aminoglycosides). · QT prolongation and arrhythmias (fluoroquinolones, macrolides). · Antibiotic resistance if spectrum is too broad or duration too long—always narrow based on culture results.

Red flags

- Pink or blood-tinged frothy coughed-up mucus (sputum) — means severe leak and possible bleeding in the lungs
- Confusion, extreme drowsiness, or trouble staying awake — the brain is not getting enough oxygen
- Blue or gray lips, tongue, or fingernails (cyanosis) — very low oxygen in the blood
- Blood pressure dropping despite a fast heart rate — the heart is failing to pump enough blood forward

Nursing priorities

1. Sit the patient fully upright at 90 degrees or in high Fowler position immediately — Gravity pulls fluid down and away from the lung bases, increasing the surface area available for oxygen exchange and reducing the work of breathing within seconds

2. Apply oxygen by nasal cannula or nonrebreather mask to target SpO₂ greater than 90 percent — Fluid in the alveoli (tiny air sacs) blocks oxygen from crossing into the bloodstream, causing low oxygen in the blood (hypoxemia) (low blood oxygen); supplemental oxygen increases the oxygen gradient to push more across the fluid barrier
3. Establish IV access and prepare to give furosemide (a loop diuretic) as ordered, typically 40 to 80 mg IV push — Furosemide blocks sodium reabsorption in the kidneys, forcing the body to dump sodium and water as urine, which pulls fluid out of the lungs and bloodstream within 20 to 30 minutes
4. Obtain a 12-lead ECG and have it read within 10 minutes — An ECG (electrocardiogram) detects ST elevation or depression that signals acute heart attack (myocardial infarction) (heart attack), which is a reversible cause of pulmonary edema (fluid flooding the lungs) requiring urgent catheterization or clot-busting drugs
5. Monitor blood pressure every 5 to 15 minutes and watch for low blood pressure (hypotension) below 90 systolic — Diuretics and nitrates lower preload (volume returning to the heart), which can drop blood pressure dangerously; low blood pressure (hypotension) reduces blood flow (perfusion) (blood flow) to the brain, kidneys, and heart itself
6. Attach continuous pulse oximetry and cardiac telemetry (heart monitor) — Pulmonary edema (fluid flooding the lungs) causes low oxygen in the blood (hypoxemia) that can trigger arrhythmias (abnormal heart rhythms); continuous monitoring catches dangerous rhythms like ventricular a fast heart rate (tachycardia) or a slow heart rate (bradycardia) before they cause cardiac arrest
7. Measure strict intake and output starting immediately, and place a Foley catheter if the patient cannot use a urinal reliably — Tracking urine output hour by hour tells you whether the diuretic is working; goal is at least 0.5 mL per kg per hour to prove the kidneys are responding and clearing fluid
8. Notify the provider immediately if respiratory rate stays above 30, SpO₂ stays below 90 despite high-flow oxygen, or the patient shows altered mental status or extreme fatigue — These signs mean respiratory failure is imminent; the patient may need noninvasive positive pressure ventilation (BiPAP) or intubation (breathing tube) to prevent respiratory arrest

Sources

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Last reviewed: 2026-07-07