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Chyle leaks are when your lymphatic vessels become damaged, and chyle — a fluid — leaks into nearby tissues, causing swelling and other symptoms. Most chyle leaks occur as rare but serious complications of surgery. Healthcare providers often treat chyle leaks with diet, rest and medication. Chyle leaks are sometimes known as chylous leaks or chylous fistula. How common are chyle leaks? Chyle leaks are rare surgical complications. This condition occurs in less than 1% of thyroidectomies and about 8% of other head and neck surgeries. Chyle leaks can also happen after abdominal surgery, chest surgery or surgery to remove your kidney (nephrectomy). How serious is a chyle leak? A chyle leak is serious. These leaks can cause: Rarely, chyle leaks can cause: Chylothorax: This condition happens when chyle builds up in the pleural space between your lung and chest wall. Healthcare providers may diagnose chylothorax after it presents as pleural effusion. Chylous ascites: Chyle builds up in your abdomen. Ascites happens when fluid fills your abdomen. This condition usually happens after traumatic injury to your abdomen, chest or neck. In most cases, the cause of a chyle leak is surgery. Chyle leaks are rare complications of surgery, especially head and neck surgery. They happen because of damage to lymphatic vessels, often in your thoracic duct. Chyle leaks can also be a complication of lymphoma. What is the thoracic duct? Your thoracic duct is a large vessel of your lymphatic system, reaching from your abdomen to your neck. Your thoracic duct moves lymph and chyle through your body's tissues. Lymph from the left side of your body and the lower half of the right side moves through this duct. What are the symptoms of a chyle leak? One symptom of a chyle leak is visible chyle during surgery. Healthcare providers also check surgical drains after surgery for increased fluid, especially after you eat foods that contain fat. After surgery, symptoms of a chyle leak may include: Lymphedema. Reddening of your skin. Swelling above your collarbone (clavicle). During an operation, surgeons check the area to see if chyle is present before closing the incision. But chyle leaks aren't always visible. After surgery, healthcare providers check you for signs of a chyle leak. What tests do healthcare providers use to diagnose a chyle leak? During surgery, healthcare providers may move your body in certain ways to increase pressure in your chest or abdomen to see if chyle may be leaking. They do this before closing the incision. As you recover, healthcare providers do a physical examination to check for chyle leak symptoms. They also check any surgical drains for fluids. If you have swelling, providers may take a sample of the fluid to check the amount of fat (triglycerides) present. High triglycerides in the fluid may mean chyle is leaking. If surgeons diagnose a chyle leak during surgery, they may use clips or stitches (sutures) to stop the leak. How is a chyle leak treated after surgery? Treatment after surgery depends on how severe the leak is. Your healthcare provider recommends treatment based on your overall health. When chyle leaks don't respond to dietary changes or medications, providers may recommend surgery to stop the leak. How do you stop chyle from leaking? To stop a chyle leak, your healthcare provider may recommend nonsurgical treatments. You may need to: Avoid physical activity (bedrest). Eat a modified diet. Take medications to prevent fat absorption. Use stool softeners to stop straining during bowel movements. What is a chyle leak diet? Your healthcare provider may tell you to eat a low-fat or fat-free diet for a while. Follow your provider's instructions to help you stay healthy while the leak heals. Low-fat diets may include: Certain fruits. Fat-free breads, cereals and dairy products. Lean meats and fish. Plain vegetables. What can't I eat or drink if I have a chyle leak? Your healthcare provider may recommend that you avoid foods and drinks that are high in fat and sugar. Some people with a chyle leak need IV fluids to stay hydrated and get nutrition. What medications do healthcare providers use to treat chyle leaks? Your provider may prescribe medications to treat chyle leaks. These drugs, which you take through a catheter inserted into a vein (IV), include: Somatostatin. Octreotide. Your provider may place medication on the area where the chyle leak is (topical medications) during or after surgery to help close leaks. How long does it take to recover after chyle leak treatment? Mild chyle leaks heal after the chyle drains, often in about a week. If a chyle leak doesn't heal, you may need surgery to repair it. Chyle leaks happen when lymphatic vessels become injured. There isn't anything you can do to prevent this condition. Your healthcare provider will give you detailed instructions about diet and activity. Follow these instructions carefully and keep any follow-up appointments. How long will I have a chyle leak? Many chyle leaks heal in about a week with lifestyle and dietary changes. What other effects are there from a chyle leak? A chyle leak can make it harder for your body to heal from cuts or wounds. Extra chyle in the tissues near a wound can cause tissues to become inflamed. This inflammation can affect healing and make infection more likely. What is the outlook if I have a chyle leak? If the chyle leak heals properly, you'll return to eating your regular diet. Normal wound healing also resumes once the chyle leak heals. Most chyle leaks heal within a week or so with treatment. Can you get a chyle leak more than once? Yes, you can get a chyle leak more than once. Follow your healthcare provider's instructions carefully to give the chyle leak the best chance to heal quickly. A note from Cleveland Clinic Chyle leak is a serious condition that sometimes happens when lymphatic vessels become damaged after surgery or injury. Your healthcare provider may recommend eating a special diet and restricting activity to help the leak heal. It's important to follow instructions to avoid complications like dehydration and malnutrition. Last reviewed by a Cleveland Clinic medical professional on 08/12/2022. References Cifarelli V, Eichmann A. The Intestinal Lymphatic System: Functions and Metabolic Implications. (Cell Mol Gastroenterol Hepatol. 2019;7(3):503-513. Accessed 8/12/2022. Delaney, Sean W, Haoran Shi, Alineza Shokrani, et al. Management of Chyle Leak after Head and Neck Surgery: Review of Current Treatment Strategies. (International Journal of Otolaryngolog. 2017. Accessed 8/12/2022. National Cancer Institute. SEER Training Modules. Introduction to the Lymphatic System. (Accessed 8/12/2022. Steven B, Carey S. Nutritional management in patients with chyle leakage- a systematic review. (Nature.com. Eur J Clin Nutr. 69, 776–780 (2015). Accessed 8/12/2022. Cleveland Clinic is a non-profit academic medical center. Advertising on our site helps support our mission. We do not endorse non-Cleveland Clinic products or services. Policy YUMPU automatically turns print PDFs into web optimized ePapers that Google loves. Copy Very Low Fat Diet for Chyle Leak - Patient Education Home Extended embed settings Skip to page contentSkip to footerRoad construction around University Hospital, American Family Children's Hospital and University Station Clinic may result in travel delays and route changes. For real-time travel reports, check online websites, such as 511wi.gov, Waze or Google Maps.Read moreFor information on COVID-19 treatments or to schedule your vaccine appointment, visit uwhealth.org/covidChyle is a milky looking fluid that contains lymphatic fluid and fat. It is formed in the small intestine during digestion. Chyle is carried around the body by the lymphatic vessels of the lymphatic system. The lymphatic system carries fluid, fats, protein, and cells that fight infection around the body. A leak in the lymphatic system can occur after surgery, this is called a chyle leak.Diet to Help Heal the LeakIf you follow a very low fat or fat free diet, it can help heal a chyle leak. When you eat less fat, the body makes less chyle. This decreases the amount of chyle that can leak into the body. This can help the leak to heal.Diet Guidelines Limit your fat intake to no more than 25 grams per day. Do this by eating only fat free or very low-fat foods and drinks.The small amount of fat that is in your diet should be spread throughout the day. Do not eat all that fat at one meal.Read food labels to check the fat content of food items. Protein intake is very important. You may need to use nutritional supplement drinks or protein powders to meet your protein needs.Talk with your doctor or dietitian about taking a daily multivitamin with minerals while you are on this diet.This diet is meant only for short-term use and shouldn't be followed for longer than 3 weeks.Foods to EatFruitsFresh or canned fruitsDried fruitsFruit juiceJellyJams/Fruit spreads VegetablesPlain fresh or frozen vegetablesCanned vegetablesVegetable juice Pickles Potatoes & sweet potatoes without added fatBreads/Cereals/GrainsFat free breads, bagels, and crackersFat free cereals (no nuts) Fat free pasta and riceAir popped popcorn Fat free muffinsDairySkim milk, skim milk powderFat free cheese and cottage cheeseFat free sour cream and cream cheeseFat free yogurt and frozen yogurtMeats and Meat SubstitutesFat free lunch meat/deli meatFat free hot dogsFat free egg substitute or Egg Beaters®, egg whitesFat free veggie burgers White poultry meat without the skin and trimmed of any fatLean fish such as cod, perch, halibut, tilapiaBeans (black, pinto, kidney, white, lima) and lentils prepared without added fatFat free refried beansCondimentsFat free salad dressings and mayoKetchup, BBQ sauce, mustard, soy sauce, and hot sauceFat free salsa, relishSyrupSoupsFat free brothSoups with fat free broth, skim milk, or evaporated skim milkFatsFat free creamersFat free whipping cream/Cool Whip®DrinksDecaf or regular coffee or teaWaterCarbonated drinksJuice or lemonadeSports drinks such as Powerade® or Gatorade® Nutrition DrinksCarnation® Breakfast Essentials powder mixed with skim milkEnsure Clear® Resource® BreezeWhey protein powdersDessertsFat free puddingPopsiclesNonfat frozen yogurtFat free sherbet or ice creamFat free dessertsGelatinFoods not to EatFruitsCanned pie fillings Coconut AvocadoVegetablesOlivesVegetables in sauce made with butter, cream, or cheeseVegetables canned in oilBreads/Cereals/GrainsBreads or cereals that contain fatBread or cereals with added fat such as cream, butter, peanut butter Microwave or stovetop popcorn made with oilDairyLow-fat or full fat dairy productsCreamers that contain fatMeats and Meat SubstitutesWhole eggsNuts and seedsPeanut butter or other kinds of nut butterSoybeans/edamameFatty fish such as salmonDark poultry meatFatty cuts of meatCondimentsLow fat or regular mayo and salad dressingsSoupsFatsButter, margarine, cream,LardVegetable oilsDrinksSpecialty coffee drinks Tea or coffee with cream Shakes or smoothies that contain fat Nutrition DrinksEnsure®Glucerna®Boost®Carnation® Breakfast Essentials Ready to drink drinksGeneric or store brand nutrition supplement drinksDessertsChocolatePuddingCookies, cake, pie, doughnutsIce cream, frozen yogurtMilkshakesWho to CallIf you are a UW Health patient and have more questions, please contact UW Health at one of the phone numbers listed below. 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