

PNEUMONIA

What you need to know.

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THE  LUNG ASSOCIATION™
British Columbia

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THE FACTS

- Pneumonia is an illness of the lungs characterized by inflammation of the lung tissue.
- Bacteria, virus, and other microorganisms can cause pneumonia, which can be spread through the blood stream to infect other parts of the body.
- Pneumonia cases may range from mild to severe or even deadly. How it develops and affects people will depend on their age, health, and what caused the pneumonia.
- The symptoms of pneumonia may not be very evident in the elderly and those who are very sick. While people with poor immune systems are at increased risk, young and healthy people can also contract the illness.
- Pneumonia is a leading cause of death of children around the world.



SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS

Among the primary symptoms of pneumonia are:

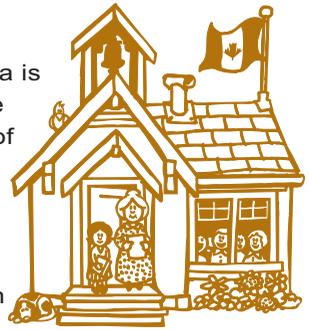
- Cough with yellow or greenish mucus, which may have traces of blood
- Sharp or stabbing chest pain made worse by deep breathing or coughing
- Fever with chills
- Rapid, shallow breathing
- Shortness of breath
- Other symptoms may include: headache, sweating, clammy skin, loss of appetite, feeling of weakness or fatigue, confusion (common in older people with serious cases)

CAUSES

Pneumonia, like all infections, is identified by its cause. A tiny bacterium called mycoplasma pneumoniae causes a type of pneumonia characterized by dry cough, fever, muscle

pains and headache.

This type of pneumonia is contagious and can be contracted by people of all ages, although it is most common in schoolage children and young adults. Outbreaks can happen in crowded places like schools and can last for several months.



Pneumonia caused by bacteria often develops quickly. A person will usually develop a cough accompanied by greenish or rust-coloured mucus. The patient may also have fever and experience chills, shortness of breath, and/or chest pain. Bacterial pneumonia will sometimes succeed another illness that one had days or even weeks prior. It can develop after a person has had an infection, a cold or flu.

On the other hand, pneumonia caused by a virus usually develops slowly. Often mistaken for the flu, viral pneumonia accounts for about half of all pneumonia cases. It usually starts with dry cough, headache, fever, and/or muscle pain. A patient may also experience fatigue. As the illness progresses, he/she may start coughing up mucus as well as develop a secondary bacterial pneumonia.

Though much less common, some types of pneumonia are caused by fungi, which are small organisms like mould and mildew. Their symptoms are usually very mild and may last for months. Antifungal medicine is used to treat pneumonia due to fungi.

Pneumocystis carinii is a fungus that affects people with weakened immune systems. People with AIDS and those taking medications like corticosteroids that weaken the immune system are especially susceptible. People with this type of pneumonia have a persistent cough and experience shortness of breath and chest pain.

PERSONS AT-RISK

Some people may be at higher risk of developing pneumonia, especially:

- People over 65
- Those with chronic lung diseases like COPD and asthma
- Those with weakened immune systems
- Diabetics
- Very young children



A person is also at high risk for pneumonia if he/she:

- Has a disease like HIV/AIDS or an on-going illness such as heart, lung or kidney disease
- Had an organ transplant and is taking drugs to suppress the immune system
- Is a smoker; smoking paralyzes the tiny hairs lining the airways that help clean the lungs
- Is an alcoholic; alcohol interferes with the normal gag reflex and reduces the number of white blood cells that fight infection
- Is hospitalized and confined in the intensive care unit
- Is exposed to certain chemicals or pollutants
- Had surgery or a serious injury

DIAGNOSIS

Most symptoms of pneumonia would make a person feel sick enough to call his/her doctor. To find out if a patient has pneumonia, a doctor will study a patient's medical history and perform a physical exam. Using a stethoscope, the doctor will try to listen for crackling and other abnormal sounds on the chest that may suggest the presence of pneumonia.



Further examinations may include:

- Chest x-rays can often determine if one has pneumonia
- Blood and sputum (mucus coughed out of the lungs) tests that can establish the cause of pneumonia
- Blood exams to check the white blood cell count (a high count indicates an infection) and to detect low oxygen levels in the blood



In some cases, a CT scan may also be recommended. If the scan shows that there is fluid in the space surrounding the lungs, a sample may be taken to identify what prompted the fluid to develop.

TREATMENT

The successful treatment of pneumonia will depend on both the severity and the cause of infection.

- Antibiotics cannot cure pneumonia caused by a virus.
- Bacterial pneumonia can be treated at home with antibiotics. However, if someone has been sick with another disease for a long time, has low oxygen levels or has a serious case of pneumonia, he/she may need to get hospital treatment. Infants and the elderly are most likely to be treated in a hospital.
- At home, drinking plenty of fluids will make it easier to cough up mucus from the lungs. In cases of fever, a person should get plenty of rest and take ASA or acetaminophen. Children should never be given ASA.
- Medicine inhalers may be prescribed to people with asthma or COPD. They provide quick relief by keeping the airways in the lungs open.
- Anti-inflammatory drugs may be given to lower a fever, treat aches and pains and soothe a cough.



- For patients confined in the hospital with a serious case of pneumonia, they may be given antibiotics intravenously and put on oxygen support.
- Most cases of pneumonia end within two weeks.

COMPLICATIONS

- People with weakened resistance due to age or a chronic condition are more likely to die from pneumonia and its complications.
- A serious side effect of pneumonia is empyema, an illness characterized by the development of pockets of pus in the lungs. People with empyema may need to have their lungs drained.
- Fluids can build up in the sac around the lungs in a process known as pleural effusion. This may also require draining the fluids.
- Pneumonia can also lead to hyponatremia, which is characterized by low sodium levels in the blood. This is especially common among young children and may require the use of intravenous fluids.

PREVENTION

With a little common sense and by following simple hygienic practices, pneumonia can be prevented. Here are some tips:

- Wash hands often, especially after blowing one's nose, going to the bathroom, changing diapers and before preparing a meal and eating.
- Don't smoke because it reduces the ability of the lungs to fight infection.
- Wear a mask when cleaning dusty or moldy areas to avoid inhaling dirt and microorganisms.
- Those at risk such as the very young, the elderly, and people with long-term illnesses should have themselves vaccinated.

While the pneumonia vaccine protects against streptococcus pneumoniae (the most common bacteria-causing pneumonia), flu vaccine prevents pneumonia and other infections caused by flu viruses.

- If recovering from surgery, take deep breaths to help prevent pneumonia.



TIPS FOR PNEUMONIA PATIENTS



- Get plenty of rest.
- Drink lots of fluids, especially water.
- If taking antibiotics, ensure treatment is completed. Take all prescribed medicine and finish it even if condition improves.
- Keep all follow-up appointments.

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