



Education

Pneumonia

What is pneumonia?

Pneumonia is an infection and inflammation of the lungs.

How does it occur?

Pneumonia occurs when the lungs are exposed to germs not usually present in the lungs. Your lungs may have become infected because:

- You were exposed to a large amount of a virus or bacteria.
- Your immune system was worn down because you were already ill--for example, with the flu.
- You have another illness, such as diabetes, chronic bronchitis, or cancer. The illness can make it easier for you to get all kinds of infections. This is why so many older adults develop pneumonia. Also, an underlying illness may make it difficult to survive a bout of pneumonia.
- You breathed in (aspirated) stomach contents. Aspiration pneumonia occurs when stomach contents back up into the esophagus and trachea. From there they are breathed into the lungs. The bacteria that normally live in the mouth can cause pneumonia if breathed into the lungs.
- You have recently had surgery, especially if you had general anesthesia.

What are the symptoms?

Common symptoms of pneumonia are:

- fever and chills
- cough
- shortness of breath
- chest pain, especially when you take a breath
- coughing up mucus, sometimes blood-stained
- muscle aches.

Not all pneumonias cause a high fever. The only symptom may be several days or weeks of dry cough, often with extreme tiredness. In the case of older adults, the only early sign of pneumonia may be confusion or a decrease in physical activity.

How is it diagnosed?

Your health care provider will review your symptoms and examine you. Your provider will check for fever and breathing problems. He or she will listen to your lungs.

The following tests help detect pneumonia:

- chest x-ray
 - blood tests
 - lab tests of a sputum sample (a sample of mucus, also called phlegm, coughed up from deep in your lungs).
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How is it treated?

Your health care provider will determine what medicine you need. Most often you will be given antibiotics and instructions for caring for yourself at home.

If your pneumonia is caused by a virus, antibiotics will not kill the virus. However, your provider may start you on antibiotics because it is often not possible to know if pneumonia is caused by bacteria or a virus. If your symptoms are very mild, you may need only rest, fluids, and observation, especially if many others in your community are having viral pneumonia.

You may need to stay in the hospital if:

- You are having a lot of trouble breathing.
- It's hard for you to drink enough fluids.
- You have no one to care for you at home.

If you are hospitalized:

- You may be given oxygen.
- You may be given IV (intravenous) fluids.
- You may be checked often by nursing staff. Electronic equipment will check your pulse and oxygen levels.
- You may have x-rays taken several times.

How long will the effects last?

If the pneumonia is caused by bacteria, usually you will begin to feel better 2 to 3 days after you start taking antibiotics. If you are an otherwise healthy person, you should feel close to normal after a week or so. If you are over 60 years old or have other medical problems, it may take longer to feel normal.

If your pneumonia is caused by a virus, you should feel better in just a few days.

How can I take care of myself?

- Start taking your medicine right away and follow the treatment your health care provider prescribes.
- Rest until you no longer have a fever, chest pain, or shortness of breath. Follow your health care provider's instructions for returning to activities such as school, work, or recreation.
- Drink more liquids (water, tea, or fruit juice) every day to help you cough up mucus more easily.
- Cough up lung secretions as much as possible. Use cough medicine only if your provider recommends you it.
- Use a humidifier to increase air moisture. Avoid steam vaporizers because they can cause burns.
- Ask your provider about taking aspirin, ibuprofen, or acetaminophen for fever or chest pain.
- Use a heating pad on a low setting to reduce chest pain. Be careful not to fall asleep while you are using the heating pad.
- Don't smoke or drink alcohol while you are recovering.
- Call your health care provider if you feel you are getting worse or if you are not getting better in 2 to 3 days.

How can I help prevent pneumonia?

- Don't smoke.
- Get a flu shot every October to protect against the flu.
- Get the pneumococcal pneumonia vaccine (Pneumovax) if you have a chronic illness or are over age 65. Adults over the age of 65 should have a second dose if they had the shot before they were 65 and it has been more than 5 years since the first shot.
- Eat a healthy diet.
- Exercise according to your health care provider's advice.

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