Intermountain® Healthcare

# Pneumonia: Prevention and Care at Home

## What is it?

Pneumonia is an infection of the lungs. The infection causes the small air sacs in your lungs (called alveoli) to swell and fill up with fluid or pus. This makes it harder for you to breathe, and usually causes coughing and other symptoms that sap your energy and appetite.

## How common and serious is it?

Pneumonia is fairly common in the United States, affecting about 4 million people a year. Although for many people infection can be mild, about 1 out of every 5 people with pneumonia needs to be in the hospital. Pneumonia is most serious in these people:

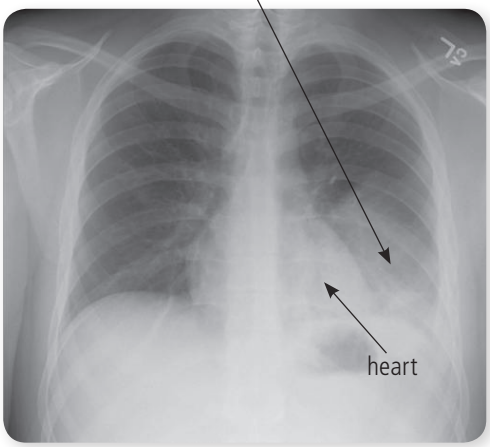
- Young children (ages 2 years and younger)
- Older adults (ages 65 and older)
- People with chronic illnesses such as diabetes and heart disease
- People with lung diseases such as asthma, cystic fibrosis, or emphysema
- People with weakened immune systems
- Smokers and heavy drinkers

If you've been diagnosed with pneumonia, you should take it seriously and follow your doctor's advice. If your doctor decides you need to be in the hospital, you will receive more information on what to expect with hospital care.

## What causes it?

Pneumonia is most often caused by germs called **bacteria**. About 1 in 5 cases is caused by a **virus**, like influenza (flu). More rarely, pneumonia can be caused by fungi.

On an x-ray, **pneumonia** usually shows up as white areas in the affected part of your lung(s).




## What are the symptoms?

Pneumonia symptoms range in severity, and often mimic the symptoms of a bad cold or the flu:

- Fatigue (feeling tired and weak)
- Cough, without or without mucus
- Fever over 100ºF or 37.8ºC
- Chills, sweats, or body aches
- Shortness of breath
- Chest pain or pain with breathing
- Loss of appetite, nausea, or vomiting
- Headache
- Fast breathing rate or heart rate

## How is it diagnosed?

If you have symptoms like these, your doctor will listen carefully to your breathing. Your doctor may also order a chest x-ray.

## How is it treated?

Treatment depends on the cause of your pneumonia (bacterial, viral, or other) and how severe it is. Most cases can be treated at home, but if you are very sick or are at higher risk, your doctor may want you to stay in the hospital. Common treatments are:

- **Medication.** Your doctor will likely prescribe a medication to fight the cause of your infection. For pneumonia caused by bacteria, you will need an antibiotic. For pneumonia caused by a virus like the flu, you may be prescribed an antiviral medication. It's important to take medication exactly as it is prescribed, for the length of time it is prescribed. Otherwise, your illness can come back worse than before.
- **Rest.** Rest and sleep help your body fight pneumonia.
- **Fluids.** Drink plenty of fluids.
- **Other supportive treatments.** You may need oxygen or other treatments to support your healing, especially if you are in the hospital.

## How can I prevent it?

Because pneumonia can be serious, it's best to try to prevent it. Below are some things to do:

- **Get all vaccines** recommended by your doctor. Vaccines for influenza (the flu) are recommended for everyone over the age of 6 months. A pneumonia vaccine is recommended for people at higher risk of pneumonia, including people who have already had pneumonia.
- **Wash your hands often** — after shaking hands and touching doorknobs, and before and after eating and cooking. Avoid touching your face.
- **Don't smoke.** Smoking damages your lungs' ability to filter out and fight germs. Current cigarette smoking doubles the risk for developing severe bacterial pneumonia.
- **Keep your immune system strong.** Get plenty of rest and physical activity, and eat a healthy diet.
- **Wear a mask** when cleaning or working in dusty or moldy places.

## When should I call the doctor?

At home, you should follow your doctor's instructions for treatment and pay attention to your symptoms. Call your doctor or go back to the emergency room if you notice any of the following:

- **Your cough is worse** or brings up blood or rust-colored mucus.
- **Your breathing is more difficult** — for example is faster, more shallow, or more painful than before.
- **You become lightheaded or very weak.**
- **You fail to start improving** within 3 days.
- **Your fever doesn't go away** within 3 days or you develop shaking chills.
- **You develop a serious side effect** to your medication — such as vomiting, frequent diarrhea, or a bad rash

**Note:** Babies with breathing problems may not always cough. Call the doctor if your baby is **making grunting noses** or if his **skin pulls in around his ribs** when he breathes. These are signs of serious problems.

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