

# Pneumonia: Guide to Hospital Care

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Being sick isn't easy, but knowing what to expect can help you feel more at ease. This guide explains what pneumonia is, how it's treated, and the care to expect each day in the hospital.

## What is pneumonia?

Pneumonia is an infection of the lungs. The infection causes the small air sacs in your lungs 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 reduce your energy and appetite.

Pneumonia is most often caused by germs called **bacteria**. Less often it's caused by a **virus**, like influenza (flu), or by a fungus. Often it develops as a complication from another illness (like the flu) that has weakened your immune system.

## How serious is it?

Pneumonia can be serious. 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

Fortunately, with good hospital care when needed, most patients with pneumonia make a full recovery.



## Why do I need to be in the hospital?

In the hospital, your healthcare providers can monitor your breathing to make sure you're getting enough oxygen. They can give you antibiotics that will treat the infection faster, and they can closely watch other signs such as your heart rate, temperature, and eating.

In some cases, your physician may want you to be in isolation to protect you and others in the hospital. Your nurse will teach you daily about your hospital care as well as what you can do to help stay well when you go home.

## How long will I need to be in the hospital?

Most people are well enough to leave the hospital within about 3 days. Many factors contribute to your treatment plan, however. Some people can go home earlier, and some need to stay longer. Talk with your healthcare providers about how long you need to stay.

## Here's what you can expect day by day in the hospital . . .

### DAY 1

#### Tests and treatments

The day you arrive you'll be given several tests to assess your condition. You may receive a chest X-ray, have blood drawn, and be asked to spit into a cup. Healthcare providers will also listen to your breathing, and check your heart rate, blood pressure, and how much oxygen your lungs are getting.

Based on your condition, you will be given treatments, such as a breathing treatment or extra oxygen. You may be given immunizations for influenza (the flu) and for pneumonia. The pneumonia vaccine may help protect you from getting pneumonia again.

#### Medications

Your treatment may include the following medications:

- **Antibiotics** to control the infection in your lungs. These are usually given through an IV (intravenous) line.
- **Medication to help prevent blood clots.** When you're lying in bed for a long time, your blood will clot more easily. Your nurse will teach you more about this medication.
- **Medication to manage fever or pain.** Managing pain well will help you recover faster. Your healthcare providers will help you set a goal for pain management. Be sure to tell them if your medication is not controlling your pain.
- **Medications from home.** Your nurse will ask for a list of all the medications you were taking at home. Your doctor will let you know which ones to keep taking while you're in the hospital.

#### Diet

Even if you don't feel like it, it's important to **drink plenty of fluids** and **eat as much as you can**. Your body needs the nutrition to help you get better. Ask your doctor if there are any specific foods you should avoid.

#### Activity

Right now you need to **rest as much as possible**. You still need to move, though. **Increase your activity as soon as you are able**. Your nurse may have you sit in a chair for 20 minutes during a meal, or walk to the bathroom.



#### What you can do

**You** are an important part of your recovery. You'll recover fastest if you and your healthcare providers work together. Even though you're not feeling well, you can do these simple things to help:

**Learn from your healthcare providers.** They'll help you with:

- How to breathe deeply to help clear your lungs.
- What you can do to prevent blood clots.
- Other questions about pneumonia.
- Information about quitting smoking, if you or someone in your household smokes.
- Things you need to know or do when you go home.

**Speak up!** Don't worry about being a bother. Ask:

- How you're doing, and how much longer they think you'll need to stay in the hospital.
- **Any** questions or concerns you have about your care, your treatment, or going home.

## Day 2

### Tests and treatments

Your blood pressure, heart rate, and oxygen level will all be checked frequently to see if there are any changes in your condition. Unfortunately, this may happen even at night, but care providers will try to disrupt your sleep as little as possible. If you are receiving oxygen, the oxygen level will be reduced as your condition improves.

### Medication

You will continue to receive an antibiotic and medications to reduce fever and pain. Discuss your pain goal with your nurse and ask for it to be written on the board in your room.

You may also continue to take medication to prevent you from developing a blood clot. Once you're able to walk more, the blood clot medication will be stopped.

### Diet

Try to eat at least half of the food that's brought to you. If you feel nauseous, ask your nurse if you can have medication to treat it. If there's a food you think you'd like to eat, let your nurse know.

### Activity

You will be asked to get as much activity as possible without tiring yourself out. You may be asked to walk down the hall while your oxygen is monitored. This will help your doctor determine if you will need oxygen at home when you leave the hospital.

### What you can do

**Learn from your healthcare providers.** They'll help you with:

- Ways to prevent pneumonia in the future. You can also refer to the tips on the last page of this handout.
- Things you need to know or do when you go home.

**Speak up!** Don't worry about being a bother. Ask:

- How you're doing, and how much longer they think you'll need to stay in the hospital.
- **Any** questions or concerns you have about your care, your treatment, or going home.

## Day 3 and continuing

### Tests and treatments

If you have been receiving extra oxygen, the goal on Day 3 will be to improve enough that you don't need it anymore. If you still need oxygen, your doctor may order it for home use. You may also have blood drawn so the doctor can tell how you are responding to treatment. And, you may be allowed to go home!

### Medication

Your doctor may change your IV antibiotic to an oral one. Being able to take medications by mouth is a step toward going home. Your nurse will teach you about the antibiotic pill.

You may also still need medication to manage fever or pain. Discuss your pain goal with your nurse.

### Diet

Try to eat most of the food that is brought to you. A well-balanced diet will help build your strength. You may need to eat small, frequent meals to make sure you get enough nutrition to recover.

### Activity

Your healthcare providers will encourage you to increase your activity. The goal is for you to slowly gain your strength back by increasing your activity level each time you walk in the halls of the hospital.

You may still get tired easily so remember not to push yourself too hard and get lots of rest when you need to.

### What you can do

**Learn from your healthcare providers.** Ask about these things:

- Things you need to know or do when you go home. Your nurse will also check to see if you have arranged for someone to take you there.

**Speak up!** Don't worry about being a bother. Ask:

- **Any** questions or concerns you have about your care, your treatment, or going home.

## What can I expect when I go home?

Even though you're well enough to go home, you may still need some time to completely recover. Here are some things you can expect:

- **Your cough and fatigue should improve**, but may last up to a few weeks.
- **You'll need extra rest.** You may need a little help from family or friends when you first go home. Try to increase your activity every day, but don't push too hard.
- **Your doctor will prescribe an antibiotic** for you to continue at home. It is important that you take the antibiotic as prescribed until it is all gone.

## When should I call the doctor?

Once you get home, 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 you cough up blood** or rust-colored mucus.
- **Your breathing is more difficult** — for example it's faster, more shallow, or more painful than before.
- **You become lightheaded or very weak.**
- **You develop a fever higher than 102° F** or you develop shaking chills.
- **You have nausea, vomiting, or diarrhea.**
- **You have increased pain.**
- **You develop a serious side effect** to your medication — such as vomiting, frequent diarrhea, or a bad rash.

## How can I prevent pneumonia in the future?

You've already experienced the fact that pneumonia can be serious. Fortunately, there are several things you can do to help prevent getting it again in the future. 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.
- **Stay away from smoke and bad air.**
  - If you smoke, now is the best time to stop. Smoking damages your lungs' ability to filter out and fight germs. Current cigarette smoking doubles the risk for developing severe bacterial pneumonia.
  - Stay away from other people's cigarette smoke, too.
  - Wear a mask when cleaning or working in dusty or moldy places.
  - Avoid spending too much time outdoors on a "bad air" day.
- **Keep your immune system strong.** Get plenty of rest and physical activity, and eat a healthy diet.
- **Wash your hands often** — especially after coming in contact with someone who is coughing and sneezing.