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What is pneumonia?

Pneumonia is a 'catch-all' term for an infection of the lung. Pneumonia can be caused by a variety of germs, including viruses, bacteria, and fungi. Pneumonia can range in severity from a mild illness to a severe, even life-threatening illness.

Who gets pneumonia?

Pneumonia is a very common illness, which any person can develop. People more likely to get pneumonia include adults 65 years or older, children younger than 5 years old, people who smoke, people with ongoing health conditions, such as chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), diabetes, congestive heart failure, sickle cell anemia, or conditions that weaken the immune system, such as HIV/AIDS, cancer therapy, or organ transplantation. Pneumonia might also be more likely to occur after some kinds of lung injury - for example, after lungs have been damaged from breathing in chemicals.

How is pneumonia spread?

Some germs that cause pneumonia can spread through the air, by direct contact with an infected person, or by contact with contaminated objects. Some causes of pneumonia can come from the environment and can be spread in dust or other fine particles (e.g., water vapor). Some germs that cause pneumonia are not spread from person to person - for example, a person who loses control of breathing (e.g., during a seizure or while intoxicated) could vomit and then inhale stomach contents and bacteria into the lungs and develop pneumonia.

What are the symptoms of pneumonia?

Symptoms of pneumonia include cough (usually with sputum or phlegm), fever, chills, shortness of breath, chest pain, muscle aches, loss of appetite, rapid breathing, and a rapid pulse.

How soon after exposure do symptoms appear?

Pneumonia symptoms can appear days to weeks (even years) after exposure, depending on the germ that causes the disease.

How is pneumonia diagnosed?

A physical exam and tests (e.g., chest x-ray, sputum or blood tests, flu test) help healthcare providers make a diagnosis of pneumonia.

What is the treatment for pneumonia?

People with pneumonia can often be treated at home with rest, medicine (e.g., pain or fever reducers), and drinking plenty of fluids. If bacteria are causing the pneumonia, your healthcare provider will prescribe antibiotics. People with severe pneumonia may need to be hospitalized to receive fluids, intravenous antibiotics and other medications, and breathing treatments.

How can pneumonia be prevented?

Pneumonia and other respiratory infections can be prevented by following these steps:

- Avoid close contact with people who are sick.
- Stay home from work or school when you are sick.
- Cover your mouth and nose when coughing or sneezing.
- Wash your hands often with soap and water (or an alcohol-based hand sanitizer if soap and water are not available).
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose, or mouth.
- Get vaccinated against germs that cause respiratory illness (e.g., influenza, pneumococcus, *H. influenzae* type b, measles, chickenpox) as recommended by your healthcare provider.
- Follow your healthcare provider's recommendations for managing your health conditions.
- Avoid tobacco smoke and excess alcohol use, both of which can decrease resistance to infection.
- Practice other good health habits, such as get plenty of sleep, be physically active, manage your stress, drink plenty of fluids, and eat nutritious foods.

How long can an infected person carry the germs that cause pneumonia?

Most people who are exposed to the germs that can cause pneumonia do not become ill or develop only mild respiratory illness; fewer people develop pneumonia. How long a person can spread a respiratory germ to someone else depends on the type of germ and the treatment that the person receives.

Should an infected person be excluded from work or school?

People with most kinds of pneumonia should rest, drink plenty of fluids, and take medications as directed by their healthcare provider, but may return to work or school when they feel able. For some causes of pneumonia (e.g., influenza, tuberculosis) individuals need to stay home until they are no longer contagious. People with pneumonia should talk with their healthcare provider for specific guidance.

How can I get more information about pneumonia?

- If you have concerns about pneumonia, contact your healthcare provider.
- Call your local health department. A directory of local health departments is located at the [VDH Local Health Districts page](#).
- Visit the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website at [the CDC page on pneumonia](#).

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