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What is pneumonia?

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

Who gets pneumonia?

Pneumonia is a common illness affecting over a million people in the United States each year. While anyone can develop pneumonia, some people are at increased risk for pneumonia. These people include:

- Adults aged 65 years or older
- Children younger than five years old
- People who smoke cigarettes and/or drink alcohol excessively
- People with ongoing medical conditions like chronic heart disease, chronic liver disease, chronic lung disease, and diabetes
- People with a weakened immune system from illness (such as HIV/AIDS) or medication (cancer therapy)

How is pneumonia spread?

Pneumonia itself is not contagious. However, the bacteria and viruses that cause pneumonia are contagious. Pneumonia caused by fungi and parasites are not contagious and are not spread from person to person.

Bacteria and viruses that cause pneumonia typically spread through the air when infected people cough, sneeze, or talk, which sends respiratory droplets in the air. These droplets can contain bacteria or viruses. When other people inhale these droplets, they may develop pneumonia. They can also be caused when a person touches a contaminated object (one that has bacteria or viruses on it) and then touches their nose or mouth. Some organisms that cause pneumonia live in the soil or in water vapor. If a person is exposed to soil that has been dug up or water vapor, they may inhale an infectious organism and develop pneumonia. These are not all of the ways a person can develop pneumonia.

What are the symptoms of pneumonia?

Common symptoms of pneumonia include:

- Cough
- Fever or chills, shortness of breath
- Chest pain when coughing or breathing
- Fatigue (feeling tired)

- Fever or chills
- Nausea, vomiting, or diarrhea
- Shortness of breath
- Altered mental status (confusion)

How soon after exposure do symptoms appear?

Pneumonia symptoms generally appear days to weeks after exposure, depending on the germ that causes the disease.

How is pneumonia diagnosed?

Pneumonia is diagnosed based on the patient's symptoms, physical exam, and medical tests. Tests that may be done to help diagnose pneumonia include blood tests, chest x-ray, oxygen levels, and sputum tests (examines liquid in lungs).

What is the treatment for pneumonia?

The treatment of pneumonia depends on what the cause is. Many people with pneumonia can be treated at home with medication prescribed by a healthcare provider.

- People with influenza (flu) or COVID-19 will generally be prescribed antiviral medication.
- People with possible or confirmed bacterial pneumonia will be prescribed antibiotics.
- People with more severe cases of pneumonia may need to be hospitalized to receive intravenous medications, additional oxygen, and other treatments.

People with pneumonia who are treated at home should get plenty of rest, take medication as prescribed, and use over-the-counter medication for fever or pain.

Do people who have been in contact with someone with pneumonia need to be tested and treated?

Certain factors will determine if people need testing or treatment. This includes the type of pneumonia a person was exposed to and if it's contagious, and if the person exposed is at increased risk of severe illness. People exposed to someone with pneumonia should talk to a healthcare provider to see what options are best for them.

How can pneumonia be prevented?

The following steps can help prevent pneumonia and respiratory infections:

- Get vaccinated against bacterial and viral infections that cause respiratory illness, such as influenza, COVID-19, respiratory syncytial virus (RSV), pertussis (whooping cough), pneumococcus, *influenzae* type b, measles, and chickenpox, as recommended by a healthcare provider.
- 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 use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer if soap and water are unavailable).
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose, or mouth.
- Follow your healthcare provider's recommendations for managing your health conditions.
- Don't smoke and avoid tobacco smoke and excessive alcohol use.
- Practice healthy habits, including getting enough sleep, being physically active, managing stress, drinking plenty of fluids, and eating nutritious foods.

How long can an infected person carry the germs that cause 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 a person with pneumonia be excluded from work or school?

In general, yes. People with pneumonia should stay out of work, school, and daycare until they are no longer contagious and well enough to return. They should talk with their healthcare provider for specific guidance about when to return to regular activities.

How can I get more information about pneumonia?

- If you have concerns about pneumonia, contact a healthcare provider.
- Contact your local health department. You can find your local health department at vdh.virginia.gov/health-department-locator/.
- Visit the CDC pneumonia webpage at cdc.gov/pneumonia/index.html.

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External link will open in new window. Click link to exit Virginia Department of Health Website.