



Pneumonia

What is pneumonia?

Pneumonia is a type of chest infection. It affects the tiny air sacs in your lungs, called alveoli. When you have pneumonia, these air sacs get inflamed and fill with fluid. This makes it harder for you to breathe.

Most people with pneumonia can be completely cured. But it can be life-threatening, and you should take it seriously even if you're young and fit.

What causes pneumonia?

Many different kinds of bacteria and viruses can cause pneumonia.

If pneumonia is caused by bacteria or viruses, it's contagious – you can catch it from another person. The most common cause of pneumonia is a bacterium called *streptococcus pneumoniae*. It's much less contagious than flu or a cold, because most people's immune systems can kill it before it causes an infection.

More people get pneumonia in winter. This is because other infections that spread easily from person to person, such as flu, are more common in the winter. Catching flu can increase your risk of developing pneumonia.

What are the symptoms?

If you have pneumonia, you'll have symptoms that are similar to having flu or a chest infection. Symptoms may develop gradually over a few days or progress much faster.

The main symptom is coughing. You'll feel weak and tired, and you'll probably have at least one of these symptoms too:

- coughing up mucus
- a high temperature – you might also sweat and shiver
- difficulty breathing or getting out of breath quicker than normal
- chest pain or discomfort
- loss of appetite

Even if you have pneumonia, you may not have all these symptoms.

More severe cases may also cause:

- quick breathing
- confusion
- low blood pressure
- coughing up blood
- rapid heartbeat
- nausea and vomiting

Some people get a sharp pain in their chest when they breathe in and out. This may be because the thin outer covering of the lung has become infected and inflamed. This inflammation, called **pleurisy**, stops your lungs moving smoothly as you breathe.

The symptoms of pneumonia are often very similar to those of other chest infections, such as bronchitis, COPD flare-ups or bronchiectasis flare-ups. To get a proper diagnosis you'll need to visit your GP.

If you feel unwell with these symptoms, see your GP or call **111**. If you have severe symptoms, especially **chest pain, a rapid heartbeat, quick breathing, shivers or confusion**, get urgent advice from your GP or call **999**. Take extra care if you're over 65.

Who is most at risk?

You can get pneumonia at any age. Each year in the UK, about 5-11 adults out of every 1,000 get pneumonia.

Some groups of people are at higher risk from pneumonia. If you're in one of these groups, you should take extra care to reduce your chances of catching pneumonia.

People in these at risk groups include:

- babies and young children
- people over 65
- people with long-term heart, lung and kidney diseases, or diabetes
- people with cancer, especially those having chemotherapy
- people who smoke or drink alcohol to excess
- people on drugs that suppress the immune system, and those with HIV

People in hospital for other problems sometimes develop pneumonia while they're there. This can be for several reasons including the use of mechanical ventilators, recent antibiotic use or because their resistance to infection has been weakened by other medical problems.

Preventing pneumonia

There are some things you can do to reduce your risk of pneumonia.

Don't smoke

Smokers have an increased risk of developing pneumonia as well as other chest infections – and so do children whose parents smoke.

Practise good hygiene

Common winter infections increase the risk of pneumonia, so practise good hygiene to reduce the spread of germs. Use a tissue when you cough or sneeze and throw it in the bin straight away.

Get vaccinated

There are two types of vaccine available for pneumonia. They protect against the most common cause of pneumonia, the bacterium *streptococcus pneumoniae*. They aim to protect people who are at a higher risk from pneumonia, including older people and babies.

- **The pneumococcal polysaccharide vaccine (PPV)** is for people over 65 and anyone over the age of two who's in a high-risk group. Most adults will only need to have this vaccination once in their life.
- **The pneumococcal conjugate vaccine (PCV)** is given to infants by the NHS. Babies get their first dose when they're two months old.

If you're in a high-risk group, it's also a good idea to have a **flu jab** every year. It's usually free for people at risk and is available from your GP and many high street chemists.

To find out more about getting a pneumonia or flu jab, talk to your GP or call our helpline on **03000 030 555**.

Diagnosis

A doctor can often diagnose pneumonia based on the symptoms in this leaflet and by examining your chest. But you may need to have a chest X-ray to confirm that you have it.

Sometimes it can be difficult to tell whether you have pneumonia or another kind of chest infection. If it's not clear, your GP may do a blood test or take a sputum sample to help decide if you need antibiotics.

Treatment

Pneumonia can be serious so it's important to get treatment quickly. The main treatment for pneumonia is **antibiotics**, along with **rest** and drinking **plenty of water**. If you have chest pain, you can take pain killers such as paracetamol.

Treatment depends on how severe your pneumonia is.

Mild pneumonia

If you have mild pneumonia, you may be able to manage it at home with treatment from your GP, especially if you have support from family and friends. Your GP will prescribe a five-day course of antibiotics, which you'll probably take as tablets. If you don't start to feel better after three days, tell your GP – you may need a longer course of antibiotics.

More severe pneumonia

Some people are too ill to be treated at home and need to go to hospital. If you're too ill to drink and take tablets, you can have fluids and antibiotics through a drip in your arm. You'll also have access to oxygen if you need it, and the hospital staff can regularly check your temperature and breathing to see how you're doing.

You'll usually be given two different kinds of antibiotics at the same time. You may have to take antibiotics for seven to ten days – but you won't necessarily have to stay in hospital that long.

People who are in hospital for other medical problems and then develop pneumonia have a high risk of becoming very ill. They may need different, more powerful antibiotics.

It's very important to finish your full course of antibiotics – don't stop taking your antibiotics before the end of the course, even if you start to feel better.

Recovery

Once you start taking antibiotics, your symptoms should begin to improve. Recovery times vary a lot from person to person and depend on your general health, age and how severe your pneumonia is. If your symptoms don't improve in 48 hours, or if they get any worse, call **111** or **999** for a reassessment.

It's impossible to say exactly how quickly you'll recover, but here's an idea of what to expect:

1 week	your fever should be gone
4 weeks	your chest will feel better and you'll produce less mucus
6 weeks	you'll cough less and find it easier to breathe
3 months	most of your symptoms should be gone, though you may still feel tired
6 months	you should feel back to normal

You'll recover gradually and can help by eating well, exercising and doing deep breathing exercises.

At first, you'll need plenty of rest. As you begin to feel better, you can start to be a bit more active, but don't push yourself. Start off by getting out of bed and moving around for a few minutes each day. As your symptoms improve and you have more energy, you can increase your activity. Speak to your doctor about how much exercise you should do as you recover.

Exercising your lungs may also help. You can do this by taking long slow deep breaths or blowing through a straw into a glass of water. Deep breathing is also good for clearing the mucus from your lungs: breathe deeply five to ten times and then cough or huff strongly a couple of times to move the mucus. Ask your doctor if breathing exercises could help you.

You can find out more about using breathing exercises to clear your lungs from the Association of Chartered Physiotherapists in Respiratory Care. They've produced a patient information leaflet about the *Active cycle of breathing techniques* which you can read at www.acprc.org.uk/publications

If your symptoms are slow to disappear, if you're over 60 and you smoke, you should have a chest X-ray six weeks after you started your antibiotics. This is to check that the infection has gone from your lungs.

The vast majority of people recover from pneumonia and return to good health. However, pneumonia can be very serious and some people with severe pneumonia don't survive, despite the best available care. Those who are elderly or have other health problems are most at risk.

Further information

Call our helpline on **03000 030 555**, where our friendly team will be happy to talk about your concerns and answer your questions.

Get in touch with us to find support near you.

Helpline: **03000 030 555**

Monday to Friday, 9am-5pm

Ringing our helpline never costs more than a local call and is usually free, even from a mobile.

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We value feedback on our information. To let us know your views, and for the most up to date version of this information and references, call the helpline or visit blf.org.uk