

# Pneumonia

Pneumonia is a type of chest infection that affects the small air sacs in your lungs (alveoli). When you have pneumonia, these fill with fluid and get inflamed which makes it harder for you to breathe. Pneumonia is completely treatable in most people but it can make you very unwell, and even if you're young and healthy you should take it seriously.

## What causes pneumonia?

Pneumonia is caused by a variety of bacteria and viruses. The most common cause of pneumonia is a bacterium called *Streptococcus pneumoniae*.

Pneumonia is contagious, meaning you can catch it from another person, although it is much less contagious than flu or a cold as most people's immune system can kill it before it causes an infection.

Pneumonia is more common in the winter the same as other infections, such as flu. Catching flu can increase your risk of developing pneumonia.

## What are the symptoms?

Pneumonia symptoms are similar to having the flu or a chest infection. Symptoms can develop over a few days or progress quickly. The main symptom is coughing. You'll feel weak and tired, and you may have at least one of the following symptoms too:

- Coughing up sputum (phlegm)
- A high temperature - you may also sweat and shiver
- Chest pain or discomfort
- Difficulty breathing
- Loss of appetite

**If you feel unwell with these symptoms see your GP or call 111.**

**If you have severe symptoms, especially a rapid heart rate, chest pain, confusion or quick breathing, get urgent advice from your GP or call 999.**

**Take extra care if you're over the age of 65.**

## Who is most at risk?

Anyone can get pneumonia. Each year in the UK approximately 220,000 people get pneumonia. Some groups of people are at a higher risk of pneumonia than others. If you're in one of these high-risk groups you should take extra care to reduce your chances of catching pneumonia.

People in these high-risk groups include:

- Babies and young children
- People over the age of 65
- People with chronic heart, lung or kidney diseases, or diabetes
- People with cancer, especially those having chemotherapy
- People on drugs that suppress the immune system and those with HIV

## Treatment

Pneumonia is treated with antibiotics. It is important to rest and drink plenty of water. If you have chest pain, analgesia (painkillers), such as paracetamol can be taken.

People with mild pneumonia can normally be treated at home with antibiotics but more severe cases may require hospital admission.

It's important to finish your full course of antibiotics. Do not stop taking your antibiotics before the end of the course even if you start to feel better.

## Recovery

Recovery times vary from person to person and depend on your general health, age and severity of pneumonia. Your symptoms should improve once you start antibiotics. It's impossible to say how quickly you'll recover but here's an idea of what to expect - it will vary depending on any other health conditions or other chest problems you have:

- **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, although you may still feel tired
- **6 months** - you should feel back to normal

## Follow-up

For most cases of pneumonia, it is important to check that the infection has completely resolved by doing a repeat X-ray after the body has had a chance to recover. This is normally done at least 6 weeks after the first X-ray.

- **Your first X-ray was done on ...../...../.....**
- **Your doctor has requested another X-ray to be done week commencing \_\_\_\_\_**

You can attend the X-ray department without a booked appointment (Monday to Friday) at one of the following:

- **Lister Hospital, Stevenage:** 8.30am - 4pm
- **New QEII Hospital, Welwyn Garden City:** 8.30am - 4pm
- **Hertford County Hospital:** 9am - 12.30pm and 2pm – 4.30pm

If the infection has not completely resolved on your repeat X-ray it may be necessary to do further tests, such as another X-ray, CT scan or to have a look into your lungs with a camera.

You will get a letter informing you of the result and may be offered a clinic appointment if any more tests are needed.

## To help prevent pneumonia

- Don't smoke
- If you have inhalers, use them regularly
- Keep active
- Practise good hygiene
- Get vaccinated

## Further information

- **NHS Website** <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/pneumonia/>

## Useful contact details

### East and North Hertfordshire NHS Trust:

- Website [www.enherts-tr.nhs.uk](http://www.enherts-tr.nhs.uk)
- Telephone 01438 314333

### British Lung Foundation:

- Website [www.blf.org.uk](http://www.blf.org.uk)
- Helpline 03000 030 555 (Monday to Friday, 9am - 5pm)

### Hertfordshire Stop Smoking Service:

Telephone **0800 389 3998** to refer yourself to the service or

Text **`Smokefree`** to **80818** or

online via [www.hertsdirect.org/stopsmoking](http://www.hertsdirect.org/stopsmoking)

## Leaflet information

**You can request this information in a different format or another language;  
please speak to your doctor or nurse.**

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