

# About pneumonia

Pneumonia is a chest infection that people of all ages can get. It can be serious, and sometimes life-threatening. Older people and people with poor health or lung disease tend to get it more often. It is also usually worse in these people.

## Main take-home messages

- It can take MOST of a week to begin to feel better after starting your antibiotics.
- A cough and tiredness can continue for 4–6 weeks.
- It is important to rest, but not stay in one position. Move around the house and take good breaths. If this is uncomfortable take some simple painkillers such as paracetamol.
- Drink plenty of fluids. Try to eat nutritious foods (e.g., fruit and vegetables) when you are able.
- If you are feeling more unwell (see symptoms below), see your doctor sooner. For an urgent review you can attend an afterhours doctor (e.g., Second Avenue Healthcare, The Doctors Bayfair). This review may be free to you if you have an Acute Demand referral form (please take this with you). If it is an emergency, present to the Emergency Department.

## What causes pneumonia?

You get pneumonia by breathing in bacteria, viruses or other germs, which then infect your lungs.

The air sacs at the end of your small airways, called alveoli, and the surrounding lung tissue become inflamed. They can then fill with infected fluid, which makes it hard to breathe. Usually pneumonia is caused by bacteria, which means you need to take antibiotics to treat it.

## What are the symptoms of pneumonia?

If you have pneumonia it can make you quite sick.

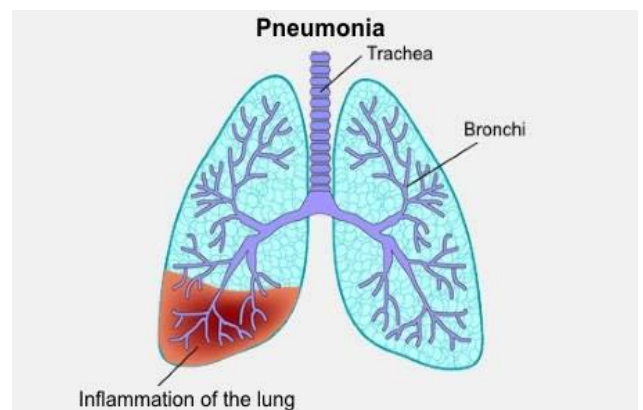
People with pneumonia generally:

- have a cough, and will cough up sputum (phlegm) that is often yellow-green, rusty, or sometimes blood-stained
- be short of breath
- have a high temperature (over 38°C), with shivers, sweats, aches and pains
- feel sharp chest pain when they breathe – this happens if the lining around their lungs is inflamed (a condition called pleurisy)
- feel generally unwell.

Older people might not have a fever or any specific symptoms, but you might notice that they are confused or agitated.

## Important!

If you or someone with you has these symptoms, is confused, and is also very short of breath or has blue lips or fingers, see a doctor immediately.



# How is pneumonia treated?

To diagnose pneumonia, your doctor will ask you to describe your symptoms and examine you. You may need to go for a chest X-ray. Sometimes your doctor will ask for sputum (phlegm) sample. It is important to let your doctor know if you have been doing gardening activities, or have been overseas recently. These things can lead to different lung infections that need different treatment. If your doctor thinks you have pneumonia, they will weigh up whether you are well enough to be treated at home.

## Treatment at home

Your doctor will prescribe antibiotics. It is important that you take these exactly as your doctor says. Let your doctor know as soon as possible if you think you are getting side effects that could stop you taking the antibiotics.

Your doctor will usually see you again within 48 hours to make sure you are not getting worse. You may not need to pay for this appointment. If it happens over a weekend, your doctor can arrange for you to go to an after-hours medical centre (e.g., Second Avenue Healthcare, The Doctors Bayfair). For free medical advice call your GP practice 24/7 - calls are triaged after 6pm.

It is important to rest and drink plenty of fluids. You can take paracetamol or ibuprofen to help with the fever and pains. Good nutrition can help your recovery also.

If you think you are getting worse, see a doctor straight away. Don't wait until your next appointment.

There is no clear evidence that self-care measures like cough medicine and steam inhalation will help. Honey in warm water can be as effective. You are likely to be infectious for the first five days or so of a chest infection, so try to avoid spas and steam rooms.

## Treatment in hospital

Sometimes your doctor may feel that you should be looked after in hospital. This may be because they are worried about how bad your infection is. It might also be that you need investigations or treatments that are only available in hospital.

The medical team that cares for you in hospital will explain what they are doing to treat your infection. Before you go home you will get any medication that you need to keep taking, and a discharge letter that explains your treatment and any follow-up care you need. You should make an appointment to see your GP in your first week back home, so they can check you are staying well.

You may need to have a chest X-ray a few weeks later to make sure your lungs have got better. Your GP will organise this.

## How long will it take to recover?

It may take several days or even a week to begin to feel better. Ask your doctor for a medical certificate if you require one. It's normal to feel tired and washed out for a while after having pneumonia. But if you're still not better after three weeks, see your doctor.

## How can I avoid getting pneumonia again?

Stop smoking. This is the most important way of reducing chest infections.

Make sure you have a flu vaccination every year if you have a long-term health condition such as COPD. Some people with specific health issues should get the pneumococcal vaccine. Talk to your GP about whether this applies to you.



# Avoid Legionnaires' disease by gardening safely

Legionnaires' disease is a severe infectious disease that can give you a high fever and pneumonia (chest infection), making you very sick. It is caused by a bacteria that lives well in warm, moist conditions, and is spread by inhalation of infected droplets or particles.

Legionnaires' disease is common, and is often caused by people accidentally inhaling dust from when they are gardening.

Anyone can get Legionnaires' disease, but if you are over 50, a smoker, have a long-term illness (especially lung disease), or have low immunity, then you may be more vulnerable to catching it, and the effects may be more serious for you.

## Symptoms may include:

- Dry coughing
- A high fever
- Chills
- Diarrhoea
- Shortness of breath
- Chest pain
- Headaches
- Excessive sweating
- Nausea and vomiting
- Stomach pain

If you have any of these symptoms, and you have recently been handling potting mix or compost, see your general practice team as soon as possible. Make sure you tell your doctor that you have been in contact with these products. There is a special test to find out if you have Legionnaires' disease.

## Safe use of potting mix

To avoid getting Legionnaires' disease, be very careful when using potting mix, seed raising mix, compost, or other soil products. It's very important that you do not inhale the dust from any of these products.

To keep yourself safe, follow these guidelines:

- Avoid eating and drinking outside whilst gardening.
- Wash your hands very well after touching potting mix or soil products, or after doing any gardening.
- Wear a disposable face mask and gloves when opening bags of potting mix or other soil products.
- Open bags carefully, using scissors rather than ripping the bag.
- Do your potting outside, in a well-ventilated area.
- Use a sprinkle of water to dampen down potting mix or compost. This stops the dust from spreading in the air.

