

Chest infections

Emergency Department factsheets



What is a chest infection?

A chest infection is an infection that affects your lungs, either in the larger airways (*bronchitis*) or in the smaller air sacs (*pneumonia*). There is a build up of pus and fluid (*mucus*), and the airways become swollen, making it difficult to breathe. The main causes include:

- virus
- bacteria
- mycoplasma (a special kind of bacteria).

Chest infections can affect people of all ages. Young children, the elderly, smokers and people who are already ill are most at risk of developing a chest infection.

What are the symptoms of pneumonia?

Pneumonia can strike out of the blue or come on slowly over a few days. It is more common in winter and spring. The symptoms will depend on your age, the cause and severity of the infection and any other medical problems you may have. Common symptoms include:

- chest pain
- fast or difficult breathing
- coughing with brown or green coloured phlegm
- fever (sweating, shivering, chills)
- feeling unwell and more tired (lethargy).

You may also have stomach or chest pain, headaches, general aches and pains and not feel hungry. A child may vomit, have diarrhoea and be irritable or lethargic.

Treatment

The doctor may arrange tests, such as a chest x-ray, a sample of your phlegm and blood tests. The results will be sent to your local doctor.

In some cases, such as when a virus is the most likely cause, chest infections do not need any treatment. In other instances, antibiotics are sometimes needed to help with recovery.

Painkillers, such as paracetamol, may help with pain and fever.

Home care

- Take your medication as directed. This may include antibiotics to help with the infection or painkillers to help with breathing or fever.
- Finish the full course of antibiotics that you are prescribed, even if you feel better after two to three days.
- Drink plenty of fluids.
- Rest for a few days. You will find it easier to breathe if you prop yourself up on a couple of pillows to sleep.
- Do not smoke.
- If chest pains start to feel different seek medication attention.
- Avoid contact if possible with anyone that is already unwell, the elderly or very young children/babies.

What to expect

Most people treated at home make a full recovery. If you have a bacterial chest infection, you should start to feel better within 24 to 48 hours of starting antibiotics. You may have a cough for days or weeks.

For other types of chest infections the recovery is more gradual. You may feel weak for some time and need a longer period of bed rest.

A chest infection can be serious for those who are very young or very old or the chronically ill, who may need to spend time in hospital.

If you smoke, you are putting yourself at risk of further medical problems and delaying your recovery.

Prevention

The spread of infection can be minimised by these simple measures:

- Cough into a tissue or cover your mouth when you cough. If you cough up phlegm, use disposable tissues and throw them into the bin.
- Wash your hands with soapy water regularly after coughing, sneezing and using tissues.
- Vaccines are available to reduce the risk of some types of chest infection. Ask your local doctor. Certain people can be vaccinated against one of the most common types of bacterial pneumonia. It is not effective in children under the age of two.
- Children are routinely vaccinated against *pneumococcal bacteria* (which may cause pneumonia, meningitis and other illnesses) at two, four and six months of age.
- The elderly and people with chronic conditions are advised to have a flu vaccination every year before winter comes.

Follow-up

You may be advised to see your local doctor within 48 hours, especially if you are not improving. This may need to be sooner if:

- you are having breathing difficulties such as feeling breathless or breathing very fast or hard (laboured)
- you have worsening pain on breathing or you have pain which stops you breathing deeply.
- you are unable to eat or drink
- you have any new changes to the colour or your lips or skin.

If you have any concerns or questions, contact your local doctor.

You will need to see a doctor after six weeks to make sure that you have made a full recovery. A chest x-ray may be needed at this time.

Seeking help

In a medical emergency, go to the nearest hospital emergency department or call an ambulance (dial 000).

For other medical problems see your local doctor or health-care professional.

13 HEALTH (13 43 25 84) provides health information, referral and teletriage services to the public in all parts of Queensland and is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year for the cost of a local call*.

*Calls from mobile phones may be charged at a higher rate. Please check with your telephone service provider

Disclaimer: This health information is for general education purposes only. Please consult with your doctor or other health professional to make sure this information is right for you.

Want to know more?

Contact Quit for help to stop smoking

Phone 13 QUIT (13 78 48)

www.quit.org.au

Contact the Australian Lung Foundation

Phone 1800 654 301

www.lungfoundation.com.au

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