Pneumonia

What is Pneumonia?

Pneumonia is inflammation or irritation in the lungs usually caused by an infection. The infection is most often due to a virus or bacteria but can occasionally be due to a fungus (mold).

How did I get pneumonia?

The virus or bacteria that causes most pneumonias was probably picked up from the environment or another person. You can get pneumonia from direct contact (touching something that has the virus or bacteria on it and then touching your mouth/nose) or from droplets in the air from when someone coughs or sneezes. Infection risk is higher in patients who have lung disease such as asthma or COPD (emphysema or chronic bronchitis); or who have other long-term diseases such as heart failure, uncontrolled diabetes, or are immunocompromised.

What are symptoms of pneumonia?

Most people with pneumonia will not feel well. They typically have a cough, poor energy, and low appetite. They may also develop a fever or chills, have difficulty breathing, or have pain with breathing. Some patients may also have a low oxygen levels or fast breathing rate due to their pneumonia.

How is pneumonia diagnosed?

Pneumonia is usually diagnosed by a healthcare professional based on symptoms and a physical exam. Sometimes, a chest X-ray is also done to check for pneumonia. If influenza is suspected, then a nose swab may be done as well. Other tests may also be done, including blood work, to help determine if pneumonia or something else is the cause of your symptoms.

What is the usual treatment for pneumonia?

Most pneumonias are treated with antibiotics, usually for 5 days but, sometimes for longer. If you have pneumonia due to influenza, then you are likely to be treated with an antiviral medication such as oseltamivir instead. You may also be given oxygen and breathing treatments to help with your symptoms. You also want to be sure to drink plenty of fluids and get rest while you are recovering from your pneumonia. It is helpful to sit up when you can during the day, or lie with your head in an elevated position.

I had the pneumonia shot, doesn’t that mean I shouldn’t get pneumonia?

No. Although there is more than one type of pneumonia vaccine, they only protect your from some types of bacteria. But the vaccine does not protect against all types of bacteria that can cause pneumonia and does not protect against other infections.
There are many causes of cough, so a cough alone does not mean you have pneumonia. Talk to your healthcare provider about other causes of cough in addition to pneumonia. Talk with them urgently if you have a fever or difficulty breathing.

Don’t I need to go to the hospital if I have pneumonia?

Not necessarily. Most cases of pneumonia can be safely treated in the nursing facility. Very low blood pressure may be a sign of a more serious infection that requires closer monitoring, so this may be a reason to go to the hospital. Other reasons that you may need to go to the hospital are very low oxygen levels or rapid breathing. These breathing difficulties may be treated with artificial ventilation (a breathing machine). You should talk with your healthcare provider about whether or not you would want a breathing machine in such a situation.

Your nurse is going to monitor you closely and if you are not getting better or are showing signs of a worsening infection, she/he will let your healthcare provider know.

What can I do to help prevent myself from getting pneumonia again?

The best things you can do to prevent pneumonia are to make sure you are getting a yearly influenza vaccine and are up to date on your pneumonia vaccines. Be sure to wash your hands frequently, especially before eating. You should avoid smoking and 2nd hand smoke because they will increase your risk of pneumonia. You may also want to consider asking friends and relatives to stay home rather than visit when they are sick with a respiratory (breathing) illness.

I was just diagnosed with pneumonia. When should I expect to feel better?

Most people with pneumonia start to feel better within a few days. It will take a little longer for all of your symptoms to go away completely. Sometimes, a cough due to pneumonia can take a month or more to go away.