

Pneumonia

Information for parents and/or caregivers

What is Pneumonia?

Pneumonia is inflammation or infection in one or both of the lungs. Pneumonia in children can be caused by viruses or bacteria. Viruses are the most common cause of pneumonia.

Due to the infection, the small airways in the lungs become swollen and make a sticky fluid (mucous). The mucous blocks the airways and reduces the amount of oxygen that is able to get into the body. Pneumonia can affect one part (lobe) of the lung or the entire lung.

How is it Diagnosed?

The doctor will determine if your child has pneumonia by asking you questions and examining your child.

Blood tests are sometimes helpful to find the likely cause of the pneumonia (i.e. bacteria or virus)

A chest X-Ray can confirm the diagnosis – if your child has pneumonia the x-ray will show fluid (consolidation) in the lungs.

Pneumonia often comes after a respiratory infection such as a cold or flu. Most children with pneumonia get better quickly and completely.

Signs and Symptoms

Signs and symptoms of pneumonia vary depending on your child's age and the cause of the pneumonia.

Children often have one or more of the following:

- High fever
- Fast and/or difficult breathing – you can often see the ribs "sucking in" when they are breathing.
- Cough
- Vomiting
- Irritable, more tired than usual
- Pain in chest (especially when coughing)
- Tummy (abdominal) aches/pains

Most children refuse to eat. This is concerning to parents but remember that your child will begin to eat again once they feel better. It is important to give your child fluids to prevent dehydration. Offer small sips of water and offer babies the breast or bottle more often.

Care at home

Most children with pneumonia are able to be treated at home.

They will need:

- A lot of rest
- Drink small amounts of fluid often to stop them becoming dehydrated.
- Older children may prefer sleeping propped up on pillows rather than lying flat.
- If your child has chest pains they may need some pain relief such as paracetamol
- Do not give cough medicines. They do not help children with pneumonia
- **Smoking around your child should be avoided at all times**

Bacterial Pneumonia

If your child's pneumonia is caused by bacteria they will be given antibiotic medication to take. Children with bacterial pneumonia usually improve a lot within 24-48 hours of starting antibiotics. The fever will come down, they will have more energy and their breathing will become easier. They may continue to cough however for days to weeks. It is very important to complete the whole course of antibiotics, even if your child seems remarkably better. Antibiotic treatment continues for 5-10 days.

Viral Pneumonia

Antibiotics do not cure viruses and are not given for viral pneumonia. Recovery is usually slower, over 2-4 weeks. (See: treatment at home above)

Treatment in Hospital

Some children with pneumonia need to be admitted to hospital. This is usually if they:

- Are less than one year old
- Are not able to take medicine by mouth
- Have become dehydrated
- Have severe breathing problems

While in hospital your child will be observed (watched) closely and the following treatments may be required:

- Antibiotics might be given directly into a vein through a drip (Intravenous or IV) these will only be given if the pneumonia is thought to be bacterial.
- Some children may need oxygen to help them breathe more easily.
- Children who are dehydrated will need to be given fluids through a drip (Intravenous or IV therapy)

When to come back?

You should contact a doctor if your child is being treated for pneumonia and:

- Their breathing becomes more difficult
- They become more sleepy or drowsy, or are hard to wake
- They are continuing to vomit and are unable to drink much
- You are worried about your child at any stage during the illness or you have other questions

Some children need to be checked after a few days. Your doctor will tell you when to come back.

About 6 weeks after the illness your child will need to see a doctor to make sure they have had a complete recovery.

Prevention

- Keep your child up to date with immunisations. Speak to your family doctor for advice.
- Teach primary school aged children not to share eating or drinking utensils
- Teach children to wash their hands after coughing or sneezing to prevent the spread of germs.

Discharge

- Please check with your child's doctor or nurse before going home.
- If your doctor would like you to follow up with your GP, this will be up to you to arrange.

If you have any concerns after discharge please telephone:

- Paediatric Unit at FMC (08)82044629
- Family doctor
- For 24 hour health advice call - Healthdirect Australia 1800 022 222
- Parent Helpline 1300 364 100

In an emergency situation, please dial 000 for an ambulance or take your child to the nearest doctor or emergency department

Adapted from

Pneumonia: clinical practice guidelines: Royal children's hospital Melbourne

Pneumonia: kids information sheet: Royal Children's hospital Melbourne

Pneumonia: information sheet; Westmead children's hospital, Sydney

Pneumonia: information sheet: lung foundation Australia (2014)

For more information

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