

Patient information from BMJ

Last published: May 02, 2025

Pneumonia

Pneumonia is an infection in the lungs. It can be serious, so it's important to get treatment quickly.

This information explains what pneumonia is, the symptoms to look out for, and how it's treated.

What is pneumonia?

Pneumonia is an infection that causes inflammation (swelling) in your lungs. It is caused by either a virus, bacteria, or fungi. Parts of your lungs can then fill up with fluid, making it harder for you to breathe.

What are the symptoms of pneumonia?

Pneumonia is a serious condition that can make you feel very unwell. The most common symptoms include:

- Cough
- Fever or chills
- Shortness of breath
- Tiredness
- Loss of appetite.

Some people get chest pain as they breathe in or out. This is because pneumonia can cause inflammation in the tissue layers around your lungs, which makes it harder for your lungs to move smoothly while breathing. This is called pleurisy.

Having pneumonia can sometimes make it hard to breathe in enough oxygen. This is very dangerous. You should get emergency medical help if you:

- Get a bluish tinge to your lips or the skin under your fingernails
- Feel confused, or another person notices that you are confused.

Your doctor might suggest a chest x-ray to check if you have pneumonia. You might also have a blood test.

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What are the treatment options for pneumonia?

If you have pneumonia that's caused by bacteria you'll need treatment with **antibiotics** as soon as possible. Antibiotics are drugs that kill bacteria. Bacteria are the most common cause of pneumonia.

If your pneumonia isn't severe, you'll likely take your antibiotics at home as pills. Your doctor should check in with you after a few days to see if the antibiotics are working. If you don't start to feel better within 3 days of starting antibiotics, you should tell your doctor. You may need to try a different type of antibiotic.

It's very important that you finish the entire course of antibiotics, even if you start feeling better. If you don't finish the pills, some bacteria may not be killed. They can start to grow in your lungs again and your pneumonia could come back and be more difficult to treat.

Antibiotics can have side effects. The most common are nausea (feeling sick to your stomach), vomiting, or diarrhea. Some people get a rash, which could suggest a mild allergic reaction. Talk with your doctor if you get a rash or any other side effects. If you're allergic to any antibiotics, such as penicillin, you should also tell your doctor.

Antibiotics will not work if your pneumonia is caused by a virus. Viral pneumonia usually clears up by itself. But you might need antibiotics if you have a bacterial infection at the same time as a viral infection.

Will I need to go to the hospital?

Most people with pneumonia recover at home. But some people need to be treated in the hospital. For example, your doctor may think you need hospital treatment if you're older, if you have other medical conditions, or if you have a more serious case of pneumonia.

If you go to the hospital, you'll be given antibiotics through a drip. You'll also be given **fluids** through the drip if you're dehydrated or too ill to drink. You'll also have your temperature and breathing checked regularly.

If you have severe pneumonia, you might also be given drugs called **corticosteroids** (you might have heard these called steroids). These help reduce the swelling in your lungs.

Taking care of yourself

Pneumonia needs to be taken seriously, even if you are young and fit. It's important to take good care of yourself to help your recovery. Here are some simple things you can do:

- Get plenty of rest. You can start to do more as you feel better, but don't push yourself. Don't do anything that you don't feel well enough to do.
- Take an over-the-counter pain reliever, like acetaminophen or ibuprofen, if you're in pain or have a fever. Make sure you take them according to the instructions on the packet. Taking too much can be dangerous.
- Drink plenty of fluids so that you don't get dehydrated.

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- Quit smoking, if you're a smoker, now is a good time to give up. Smoking damages your lungs and makes it more likely that you'll get pneumonia again. Your doctor can help you with ways to quit smoking.

What happens next?

Pneumonia is serious and can sometimes be life threatening. But most people make a full recovery with the right treatment.

If your pneumonia is caused by bacteria, antibiotics will likely clear the infection. Antibiotics don't work for viral pneumonia, but this usually gets better on its own.

Recovery time depends on factors like your age, overall health, and whether you need to be treated in the hospital. Younger people without any underlying conditions tend to recover faster. If you're older or have another condition that affects your health, it might take longer.

If your symptoms are taking a while to resolve, your doctor might recommend another chest x-ray to make sure your pneumonia has cleared up.

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