

# Pneumonia

Pneumonia is an infection of the lung that causes fluid to collect in the air sacs (alveoli).

Symptoms include:

- > breathing hard (respiratory distress)
- > breathing fast
- > occasionally painful breathing
- > coughing
- > fever, sometimes with chills.

Most rattly breathing is not pneumonia. Your child needs to see a doctor to check if he or she has pneumonia.

## What is the cause?

About 80% of pneumonia cases are caused by viruses and 20% by bacteria.

Viral pneumonia (sometimes called viral pneumonitis) is usually milder than bacterial pneumonia and cannot be treated with antibiotics. Treatment of this kind of pneumonia is supportive (i.e. paracetamol, fluids, rest). Sometimes viral pneumonia is severe and requires hospital admission for intravenous fluids and oxygen, but this is not very common.

Bacterial pneumonia tends to occur more suddenly and usually causes higher fevers (often over 40°C). This kind of pneumonia can usually be treated effectively with antibiotics (see below).

Pneumonia is usually a complication of a cold. Although colds can be passed from person to person, bacterial pneumonia is not considered contagious.

## How long does it last?

Before antibiotics were available, bacterial pneumonia was dangerous. With antibiotics, however, it improves within 24 to 48 hours. On the other hand, viral pneumonia can continue for 2 to 4 weeks. Recovery from viral pneumonia is gradual but complete.

Most children with pneumonia can be cared for at home. Admission to the hospital for oxygen or intravenous fluids is required in less than 10% of cases. Most children admitted to the hospital are young infants or children who have widespread

infection in the lungs (as shown on an x-ray).

A child who has had pneumonia once is unlikely to get it again.

## How is it treated?

### Antibiotics

Children with bacterial pneumonia need an antibiotic. Your child's antibiotic is

\_\_\_\_\_

Give \_\_\_\_\_ mg (\_\_\_\_\_ mL / tabs)

every \_\_\_\_\_ hours. Continue the

antibiotic for \_\_\_\_\_ days.

Give the entire course of the medicine even if your child is feeling better.

Only bacterial pneumonia is helped by antibiotics but, because it's difficult to tell bacterial from viral pneumonia, sometimes antibiotics are prescribed for children who have viral pneumonia.

### Medicines for fever and chest pain

Fever does not always need to be treated. It is the body's natural response to infection and helps to fight the infection. If however, your child is miserable and unwell with a fever over 38.5°C or pain, you may use paracetamol (eg Pandadol) every 4-6 hours, or ibuprofen (eg Nurofen) every 6-8 hours.



## Coughing spasms

Coughing spasms are often caused by sticky secretions in the back of the throat. Warm liquids usually relax the airway and loosen the secretions. Offer your child warm cordial, apple juice, or herbal tea. Children over 1 year old can sip warm chicken broth. Honey has also been found to be soothing for a cough but should not be used in infants under 12 months.

Encourage your child to drink a lot of fluids. In addition, breathing warm moist air helps to loosen up sticky mucus that may be choking your child. You can provide warm mist by placing a warm wet washcloth loosely over your child's nose and mouth. Or you can fill a humidifier with warm water and have your child breathe in the warm mist it produces.

Avoid steam vaporisers because they can cause burns.

Cough suppressant medicines (such as those containing dextromethorphan) are not recommended for children with pneumonia because the infectious secretions need to be coughed up. Some health care providers suggest only using these cough medicines before bedtime to help with sleep if your child's coughing is very severe.

## No smoking

Tobacco smoke makes coughs worse and last longer. Don't let anyone smoke around your child. In fact, try not to let anybody smoke inside your home. Remind a teenager with pneumonia that if he or she smokes, the cough will last weeks longer.

## When to see a doctor

### Urgently if:

- > Breathing becomes more laboured or difficult.
- > Your child starts acting very sick.

### Within 24 hours if:

- > The fever lasts over 48 hours after your child starts taking the antibiotic.
- > The cough lasts over three weeks.
- > You have other questions or concerns.

## For more information

**Paediatric Emergency Department  
Women's and Children's Hospital  
72 King William Road  
North Adelaide SA 5006  
Telephone: (08) 8161 7044  
Facsimile: (08) 8161 6750  
[www.wch.sa.gov.au](http://www.wch.sa.gov.au)**



Government  
of South Australia

SA Health



Women's  
& Children's  
Hospital