

PNEUMONIA

WHAT IS PNEUMONIA?

Pneumonia is a serious infection or inflammation of your lungs. The air sacs in the lungs fill with pus and other liquid. Oxygen has trouble reaching your blood. If there is too little oxygen in your blood, your body cells can't work properly. Because of this and spreading infection through the body pneumonia can cause death.

Until 1936, pneumonia was the No.1 cause of death in the U.S. Since then, the use of antibiotics brought it under control. In 1997, pneumonia and influenza combined ranked as the sixth leading cause of death.

Pneumonia can have over 30 different causes.

Pneumonia affects your lungs in two ways. Lobar pneumonia affects a section (lobe) of a lung. Bronchial pneumonia (or bronchopneumonia) affects patches throughout both lungs.

CAUSES OF PNEUMONIA

Pneumonia is not a single disease. It can have over 30 different causes. There are five main causes of pneumonia:

- Bacteria
- Viruses
- Mycoplasmas
- Other infectious agents, such as fungi - including pneumocystis
- Various chemicals

PREVENTING PNEUMONIA IS POSSIBLE

Because pneumonia is a common complication of influenza (flu), getting a flu shot every fall is good pneumonia prevention.

Vaccine is also available to help fight pneumococcal pneumonia, one type of bacterial pneumonia. Your doctor can help you decide if you, or a member of your family, needs the vaccine against pneumococcal pneumonia. It is usually given only to people at high risk of getting the disease and its life-threatening complications.

The greatest risk of pneumococcal pneumonia is usually among people who:

- Have chronic illnesses such as lung disease, heart disease, kidney disorders, sickle cell anemia, or diabetes.
- Are recovering from severe illness
- Are in nursing homes or other chronic care facilities
- Are age 65 or older

If you are at risk, ask your doctor for the vaccine.

The vaccine is generally given only once. Ask your doctor about any revaccination recommendations. The vaccine is not recommended for pregnant women or children under age two.

Since pneumonia often follows ordinary respiratory infections, the most important preventive measure is to be alert to any symptoms of respiratory trouble that linger more than a few days. Good health habits, proper diet and hygiene, rest, regular exercise, etc., increase resistance to all respiratory illnesses. They also help promote fast recovery when illness does occur.

Pneumococcal Vaccine

The pneumococcal vaccine is safe, it works, and one shot lasts most people a lifetime. People who get the vaccine are protected against almost all of the bacteria that cause pneumococcal pneumonia and other pneumococcal diseases as well. The shot, which is covered by Medicare, can be a lifesaver.

Who Should Get the Vaccine?

According to the National Institute on Aging, one of the National Institutes of Health, everyone age 65 and older should get the pneumococcal vaccine. Some younger people should get it also.

Ask a Doctor for the Vaccine if the resident's:

- Are age 65 or older, or
- Have a chronic illness, such as heart or lung disease or diabetes, or
- Have a weak immune system (this can be caused by certain kidney diseases, some cancers, HIV infection, organ transplant medicines, and other diseases).

Some experts say it may be best to get the shot before age 65 - anytime after age 50 - since the younger you are, the better the results. They also say people should have this shot even if they have had pneumonia before. There are many different kinds of pneumonia, and having one kind does not protect against the others. The vaccine, however, does protect against 88 percent of the pneumococcal bacteria that cause pneumonia. It does not guarantee that you will never get pneumonia. It does not protect against viral pneumonia. Most people need to get the shot only once. However some older people may need a booster; check with your doctor to find out if this is necessary. For individuals in a closed population, such as a nursing facility it is recommended to repeat the pneumonia vaccine every 5 years.