

What is a chest infection?

A chest infection is an infection that affects your lungs, either in the larger airways (bronchitis) or in the smaller air sacs (pneumonia). There is a build up of pus and fluid (mucous), and the airways become swollen, making it difficult to breathe. The main causes include:

- Virus
- Bacteria
- Mycoplasma (a special kind of bacteria).

Chest infections can affect people of all ages. Young children, the elderly, smokers and people who are already ill are most at risk of developing a chest infection.

What are the symptoms of pneumonia?

Pneumonia can strike out of the blue or come on slowly over a few days. It is more common in winter and spring. The symptoms will depend on your age, the cause and severity of the infection and any other medical problems you may have. Common symptoms include:

- Chest pain
- Fast or difficult breathing
- Coughing with brown or green coloured phlegm
- Fever (sweating, shivering, chills)
- Feeling unwell and more tired (lethargy)
- Blue colour around the lips (cyanosis).

You may also have stomach or chest pain, headaches, general aches and pains and not feel hungry. A child may vomit, have diarrhoea and be irritable or lethargic.

Treatment

The doctor may arrange tests, such as a chest x-ray, a sample of your phlegm and blood tests. The results will be sent to your local doctor.

For most people, chest infections do not need any treatment. In some instances, antibiotics are sometimes needed to help with recovery.

Painkillers, such as paracetamol, may help with pain and fever.

Home care

- Take your medication as directed. Finish the full course of antibiotics that you are prescribed, even if you feel better after two to three days.
- Drink plenty of fluids.
- Rest for a few days. You will find it easier to breathe if you prop yourself up on a couple of pillows to sleep.
- Do not smoke.

What to expect

Most people treated at home make a full recovery. If you have a bacterial chest infection you should start to feel better within 24 to 48 hours of starting antibiotics. You may have a cough for days or weeks.

For other types of chest infections the recovery is more gradual. You may feel weak for some time and need a longer period of bed rest.

A chest infection can be serious for those who are very young or very old or the chronically ill, who may need to spend time in hospital.

If you smoke you are putting yourself at risk of further medical problems and delaying your recovery.

Prevention

The spread of infection can be minimised by these simple measures:

- Cough into a tissue or cover your mouth when you cough. If you cough up phlegm, use disposable tissues and throw them into the bin
- Wash your hands with soapy water regularly after coughing, sneezing and using tissues

Vaccines are available to reduce the risk of some types of chest infection. Ask your local doctor. Certain people can be vaccinated against one of the most common types of bacterial pneumonia. It is not effective in children under the age of two.

- Children are routinely vaccinated against pneumococcal bacteria (which may cause pneumonia, meningitis and other illnesses) at two, four and six months of age.
- The elderly and people with chronic conditions are advised to have a flu vaccination every year before winter comes.

Follow-up

You may be advised to see your local doctor within 48 hours, especially if you are not improving. This may need to be sooner if you are having breathing difficulties such as feeling breathless or breathing very fast or hard (laboured). If you have any concerns or questions contact your local doctor.

You will need to see a doctor after six weeks to make sure that you have made a full recovery. A chest x-ray may be needed at this time.

Disclaimer: This health information is for general education purposes only. Please consult with your doctor or other health professional to make sure this information is right for you.

Notes:

Follow up with:

Date and Time-

Name-

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Seeking help

In a medical emergency go to the nearest hospital emergency department or call an ambulance (dial 000).

For other medical problems see your local Doctor or health-care professional.

13 HEALTH (13 43 25 84) provides health information, referral and triage services to the public in all parts of Queensland and is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year for the cost of a local call*.

*Calls from mobile phones may be charged at a higher rate. Please check with your telephone service provider



Want to know more?

- Ask your local doctor or health care professional
- Contact Quit for help to stop smoking
Call Quitline on 13 QUIT (13 78 48)
www.quit.org.au
- Contact The Australian Lung Foundation on 1800 654 301
www.lungfoundation.com.au
- Visit HealthInsite
www.healthinsite.gov.au
- Visit the Better Health Channel
www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au