



Pneumonia

Pneumonia is an infection in one or both of the lungs, and is sometimes called a chest infection. Pneumonia in children can be caused by viruses or bacteria.

Because of the infection, the small airways in the lungs become swollen and make more mucus (sticky fluid). The mucus blocks the airways and reduces the amount of oxygen that is able to get into the body.

Pneumonia often comes after another respiratory infection, such as a cold. Sometimes there may be complications associated with pneumonia, but these are not common, and your doctor will monitor your child for these.

Signs and symptoms of pneumonia

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 – your child's breathing will become hard work, and you may see the ribs or skin under the neck 'sucking in' or nostrils flaring when they are breathing; younger babies may bob their heads when breathing
- cough
- irritability or more tired than usual
- pain in the chest, especially when coughing
- abdominal (tummy) aches or pain.

When to see a doctor

You should see your GP if you think your child has pneumonia. Usually your child won't need any tests, but sometimes a GP will order a blood test or X-ray to help diagnose pneumonia.

Treatment for pneumonia

Bacterial pneumonia

If your child's pneumonia is caused by bacteria, they will be prescribed antibiotics. In mild cases of bacterial pneumonia, this medicine can be taken orally at home. Children with bacterial pneumonia usually improve within 48 hours of starting antibiotics. It is very important to complete the whole course of antibiotics, even if your child seems much better. Treatment will continue for seven to 10 days. Your child may continue to cough for up to three weeks after treatment, but this is nothing to worry about if they are otherwise getting better.

Children who are very unwell with bacterial pneumonia may be admitted to hospital for antibiotics given directly into a vein through a drip (intravenous or IV therapy). Some children may also need oxygen or extra fluids.

Viral pneumonia

Viral pneumonia is usually not as severe as bacterial pneumonia. However, recovery can be slower, taking up to four weeks. Antibiotics do not cure viruses and are not given for viral pneumonia.

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Care at home

After a doctor has diagnosed your child with mild pneumonia, you can usually care for them at home.

- Your child will need a lot of rest.
- It is important to give your child fluids frequently to prevent dehydration. Offer small sips of water, and offer babies breastmilk or formula more often.
- Most children refuse to eat when they have pneumonia. This is not a problem, as long as they are drinking fluids.
- Follow the doctor's instructions for giving antibiotics, if they have been prescribed.
- It may be more comfortable for older children to sleep propped up on a couple of pillows, rather than laying completely flat.
- If your child has chest pains or a fever and is feeling miserable, they may need some pain relief, such as paracetamol or ibuprofen. Do not give ibuprofen to children under three months old or to children who are dehydrated. Never give aspirin to children. See our fact sheet: [Pain relief for children \(www.rch.org.au/kidsinfo/fact_sheets/Pain_relief_for_children/\)](http://www.rch.org.au/kidsinfo/fact_sheets/Pain_relief_for_children/).
- Do not give cough medicines. They do not help children with pneumonia.
- Do not allow anyone to smoke in the home or around your child.
- Your doctor will tell you if you need to go back for review of your child's recovery.

You should go back to see your GP if your child has pneumonia and:

- their breathing becomes more difficult, or they develop a grunt when they breathe
- they become more drowsy or sleepy, or are hard to wake
- they begin vomiting and are unable to drink much
- you are worried about your child at any stage during the illness or you have other questions.

Key points to remember

- You should take your child to see your GP if you think they have pneumonia.
- If your child has pneumonia they will need to rest and drink small amounts of fluid often to prevent dehydration.
- It is very important for your child to complete the full course of antibiotics if they have been prescribed.
- Cough medicines do not help children with pneumonia.

For more information

- Kids Health Info fact sheet: [Fever in children \(www.rch.org.au/kidsinfo/fact_sheets/Fever_in_children/\)](http://www.rch.org.au/kidsinfo/fact_sheets/Fever_in_children/)
- Kids Health Info fact sheet: [Pain relief for children \(www.rch.org.au/kidsinfo/fact_sheets/Pain_relief_for_children/\)](http://www.rch.org.au/kidsinfo/fact_sheets/Pain_relief_for_children/)
- Kids Health Info fact sheet: [Influenza \(the flu\) \(www.rch.org.au/kidsinfo/fact_sheets/Influenza_the_flu/\)](http://www.rch.org.au/kidsinfo/fact_sheets/Influenza_the_flu/)
- Kids Health Info fact sheet: [Dehydration \(https://www.rch.org.au/kidsinfo/fact_sheets/Dehydration/\)](https://www.rch.org.au/kidsinfo/fact_sheets/Dehydration/)
- Better Health Channel: [Pneumonia \(https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/conditionsandtreatments/pneumonia\)](https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/conditionsandtreatments/pneumonia)
- See your GP.

Common questions our doctors are asked

How can I prevent my child getting pneumonia?

Keep your child up to date with their immunisations and yearly influenza shots. The best way to avoid getting pneumonia is to avoid getting respiratory infections. Teach your child not to share food, drinks and eating utensils with other children. This can be difficult in younger children, especially those at child care or kindergarten, as they often put shared toys in their mouths. Immunised children will have a much smaller risk of becoming infected with pneumonia in these instances. Good hygiene is important for preventing the spread of pneumonia, so teach your child to wash their hands thoroughly after coughing or sneezing to prevent the spread of germs.

Developed by The Royal Children's Hospital General Medicine and Respiratory and Sleep Medicine departments. We acknowledge the input of RCH consumers and carers.

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