

Chest infections

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 (mucus), and the airways become swollen, making it difficult to breathe.

The main causes include:

- Viruses (including the influenza (flu) virus)
- Bacteria (including pneumococcus and mycoplasma)
- Rarer causes include tuberculosis (TB)

Chest infections can affect people of all ages. Young children, the elderly, smokers, people with underlying lung conditions (including asthma) and people who are already ill are most at risk of developing a chest infection.

What are the symptoms of pneumonia?

Pneumonia can develop quickly 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 or feeling short of breath
- Coughing up 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

Your doctor may arrange tests such as a chest x-ray, an analysis of your phlegm, a swab to detect influenza and blood tests.

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

Pain medications such as paracetamol may help with pain and fever.

Alan, Ada and Eva Selwyn Emergency Department
24 hours, 7 days a week
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Home care

- Take your medication as directed. Finish the full course of antibiotics if you are prescribed them, even if you feel better.
- Drink plenty of fluids
- Rest for a few days. You may find it easier to breathe if you prop yourself up on a couple of pillows to sleep.
- Do not smoke
- You should return to your doctor or hospital if you are too short of breath to manage essential activities (such as getting around the house, eating, sleeping, getting to the toilet), become dizzy when you stand, are confused or drowsy, or otherwise have worsening symptoms.

What to expect

- Most people are treated at home and make a full recovery
- If you have a bacterial chest infection you should start to feel better within 24–48 hours of starting antibiotics. You may have a cough for days or weeks.
- For other types of chest infection the recovery is more gradual. You may feel weak for some time and need a longer period of 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
- Smoking puts you at risk of further medical problems and can delay your recovery

Prevention

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

- Wash your hands with soapy water regularly after coughing, sneezing and using tissues
- 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

Vaccines can reduce the risk of some types of chest infection.

- Certain people should be vaccinated against some of the most common types of bacterial pneumonia such as pneumococcal bacteria, influenza, pertussis (whooping cough) and tuberculosis

PATIENT INFORMATION

- Children are routinely vaccinated against pneumococcal bacteria (which may cause pneumonia, meningitis and other illnesses) at two, four and six months of age
- People aged over 65 years (50 years for Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islanders) and people with chronic conditions are advised to have a flu vaccination and pneumococcal vaccination every year before winter comes
- Pregnant women should be vaccinated against influenza and pertussis (whooping cough)

Ask your local doctor what vaccines are right for you.

Follow-up

You should see your local doctor within 48 hours to make sure you are improving. This may need to be sooner if you feel worse.

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

Seeking help

Cabrini Emergency Department (ED) is staffed by experienced emergency doctors and nurses 24 hours a day, 7 days per week. If you have any questions about your ED treatment our qualified ED staff can be contacted on **(03) 9508 1500** at any time. If you need to return to Cabrini ED for ongoing care we would be glad to take care of you again and if this occurs within a week of your initial consultation the doctor's fee will be bulk-billed.

You can also expect to receive a phone call or SMS message from one of our emergency nurses the day after you have been discharged. The nurse will be able to clarify any aspect of your diagnosis, treatment, or follow-up.

In a medical emergency return to Cabrini ED if it is safe to do so or go to the nearest hospital emergency department or call an ambulance – dial triple zero (000).

See your local doctor or return to Cabrini ED if you:

- Feel very **short of breath**
- Are **too short of breath to manage essential activities** (such as getting around the house, eating, going to the toilet, sleeping)
- Become **dizzy when you stand**
- Become **confused or drowsy**
- Are **not managing at home**
- Otherwise have **worsening symptoms**

Want to know more?

- Contact Cabrini ED on **(03) 9508 1500**
- Ask your local doctor or healthcare professional
- Visit the Better Health Channel at www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au
- Contact Quit for help to stop smoking on 137 848