

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 pneumococcal 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
- 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, a swab to detect influenza and blood tests.

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

Pain relief, 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.
- 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.
- You should return to your doctor or hospital if you are too short of breath to manage essential activities (such as getting about the house, eating, sleeping), become dizzy when you stand, are confused or drowsy, or otherwise have worsening symptoms.

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:

- 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. Ask your local doctor.

- Certain people can be vaccinated against one of the most common types of bacterial pneumonia, such as pneumococcal bacteria, influenza/flu, pertussis (whooping cough) or tuberculosis (TB). 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.

Notes:

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.



For health advice from a Registered Nurse you can call **NURSE-ON-CALL 24 hours a day** on **1300 60 60 24** for the cost of a local call from anywhere in Victoria.*

NURSE-ON-CALL provides access to **interpreting services** for callers not confident with English. Call **1300 60 60 24**.

*Calls from mobile calls may be charged at a higher rate



Want to know more?

- Ask your local doctor or health care professional.
- Visit the **Better Health Channel**
www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au

If you would like to receive this publication in an **accessible format**, please phone 9096 0578 or email edfactsheets@health.vic.gov.au



December 2010. Also available online at www.health.vic.gov.au/edfactsheets

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.

Authorised by the
Victorian Government
Melbourne (1009025)