
Chest infections

Summary

- A chest infection affects your lungs, either in the larger airways (bronchitis) or in the smaller air sacs (pneumonia).
 - It is likely that your own immune system will deal with the infection, as most chest infections are caused by a virus. However, antibiotics are sometimes needed to assist with recovery.
 - The elderly and people with chronic conditions are advised to have a flu vaccination every year before winter comes and pneumococcal vaccine every five years.
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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 for you to breathe.

Chest infections can affect people of all ages. Young children and the elderly are most at risk, as well as people who are ill and smokers. A chest infection can be serious for these people.

Symptoms of chest infections

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

- Fast or difficult breathing
- Coughing with brown or green-coloured phlegm
- Fever (sweating, shivering, chills)
- Feeling unwell
- Blue colour around the lips (cyanosis)
- Stomach pain
- Chest pain
- Headaches
- General aches and pains
- Loss of appetite
- A child may vomit, have diarrhoea and be irritable or lethargic.

Causes of chest infections

The main causes include:

- A virus
- Bacteria
- Mycoplasma (a special kind of bacteria).

Diagnosis of chest infections

Your doctor may arrange some tests, which could include:

- Chest x-ray
- A sample of your phlegm
- Blood tests.

Treatment for chest infections

Most people with bronchitis can be treated at home and make a full recovery. Assessment of the severity of pneumonia is complex. Some patients can be managed at home on simple antibiotics. Those assessed as severe may require admission to the intensive care unit and their illness may be life threatening.

Treatment options include:

- Your doctor will advise you about any medications you need to get over this attack.
- Some people need to be admitted to hospital for further treatment, particularly young children and the elderly who are at greater risk of serious complications.
- Review with your local doctor may be needed within 48 hours, especially if you are not improving, and again in six weeks to make sure that you have made a full recovery. A chest x-ray may be needed at this time.

Taking care of yourself at home

If you have a bacterial chest infection, you should start to feel better 24 to 48 hours after starting on 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.

Be guided by your doctor, but general self-care suggestions include:

- Take your medication as directed. Even if you feel better, finish the course of antibiotics.
- Drink plenty of fluids.
- Rest for a few days.
- Prop yourself up on a couple of pillows at night – it will make it easier to sleep.
- Stop smoking, at least until you feel better, if you can't give up at this stage.
- Contact your local doctor if you have any concerns or questions.
- Go straight to your local doctor or the nearest hospital emergency department if you (or your child) have trouble breathing, have a high fever or feel worse.

Vaccination is available

Vaccines are available to reduce the risk of some types of chest infection. Some groups like the elderly and people with chronic conditions can be vaccinated against one of the most common types of bacterial pneumonia. A different vaccine is used for children. The elderly and people with chronic conditions are advised to have a flu vaccination every year before winter comes as influenza can be complicated by pneumonia. See your doctor for more information.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- NURSE-ON-CALL Tel. 1300 60 60 24 – for expert health information and advice (24 hours, 7 days)
- Emergency department of your nearest hospital
- In an emergency, always call triple zero (000)
- The Australian Lung Foundation Tel. 1800 654 301
- **Quitline** Tel. 13 7848 (13 QUIT)

Things to remember

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