- Lungs—diseases

Pneumonia is preventable and treatable but can be dangerous

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PneumonIA is a lung inflammation caused by a bacterial or viral infection, in which the air sacs fill with pus and may become solid, which makes breathing painful and limits your oxygen intake.



The condition can be lifethreatening for anyone but especially for infants, children and people over 65.

Tomorrow (november 12) is World Pneumonia Day. It has been observed every year since 2009 by the World Health organisation (WHo), unICeF and other international organisations to create greater awareness of the symptoms, causes and treatment of pneumonia.

Pneumonia is one of the leading causes of death in children under five years of age worldwide, despite being a preventable and treatable disease.

According to the WHo it killed 740 180 children under the age of five in 2019. It was responsible for 14 percent of all deaths of children under the age of five and 22 percent of deaths of children aged between 1 and 5.

Causes

Viruses, bacteria and fungi can all cause pneumonia. The bacteria and viruses that most commonly cause pneumonia in the community are different from those in healthcare settings.Known causes of bacterial pneumonia are streptococcus pneumoniae, also known as pneumococcus, and mycoplasma pneumoniae.

The most common cause of bacterial pneumonia in children is pneumococcus. Haemophilus influenzae type b (Hib) is the second commonest cause.

The best known cause of viral pneumonia is the respiratory syncytial virus. In infants infected with HIV, pneumocystis jiroveci is one of the commonest causes of pneumonia. This is responsible for a quarter of all pneumonia deaths in HIV-infected infants.

Transmission

Pneumonia can be spread in a number of ways. The viruses and bacteria commonly found in a child's nose or throat can infect the lungs if inhaled.

The viruses and bacteria that cause pneumonia may also be spread via air-borne droplets from a cough or sneeze by someone who has pneumonia. You could become infected by inhaling these droplets or touching a surface on which they have landed and then touching your mouth or eyes. If an infected person coughs into his or her hand and then shakes hands with someone who goes on to touch mouth or eyes without washing hands, this can be another means of transmission.

Pneumonia can also be spread through blood, especially during and shortly after birth. Food particles and irritants from the intestinal tract can also cause pneumonia. This is called aspiration pneumonia. It can occur when a person accidentally inhales these substances. Aspiration pneumonia usually happens in people who have trouble swallowing, such as someone who has had a stroke or other central nervous system condition, such as Parkinson’s disease.

Fungal pneumonia typically develops when people inhale microscopic particles of fungus from the environment. People with weakened immune systems are more likely than others to develop this type of pneumonia.

Symptoms

The warning signs of viral and bacterial pneumonia are similar. However, the symptoms of viral pneumonia may be more numerous. The symptoms may develop suddenly over 24 to 48 hours or more slowly over several days.

Common symptoms of pneumonia include a cough, which may be dry or produce thick yellow, green, brown or blood-stained mucus.
Some people may experience difficulty breathing, a rapid heartbeat, high temperature, feeling generally unwell, sweating and shivering, loss of appetite and chest pain which worsens when breathing or coughing.
Less common symptoms include coughing up blood, headaches, fatigue, feeling sick or being sick, wheezing, joint and muscle pain and feeling confused or disoriented, particularly in elderly people. Wheezing is more common with viral infections. Severely ill infants may be unable to feed or drink and may experience unconsciousness, hypothermia and convulsions.
Pneumonia is diagnosed by the presence of either fast breathing or lower chest wall in-drawing where their chest moves in or retracts during inhalation. In a healthy person, the chest expands during inhalation.
Risk factors
Those who have a higher risk than others of developing pneumonia include babies and young children, elderly people, smokers and people with health conditions such as asthma, cystic fibrosis or a heart, kidney or liver condition.
others include those with a weakened immune system such as those who have suffered flu or some other recent illness or those who have HIV or AIDS as well as those undergoing chemotherapy or taking medicine after an organ transplant.
While most healthy children can fight the infection with their bodies' natural defences, children whose immune systems are compromised have a greater risk of developing severe pneumonia. A child's immune system may be weakened by malnutrition or undernourishment, especially in infants who are not exclusively breastfed. Pre-existing illnesses, such as symptomatic HIV infection and measles also increase a child's risk of contracting pneumonia. environmental factors that increase your susceptibility to pneumonia include indoor air pollution caused by cooking and heating with biomass fuels such as wood or dung, living in crowded homes and passive smoking, that is inhaling other people's tobacco smoke.
Treatment
Pneumonia can usually be treated at home with antibiotics in the case of a bacterial infection or antiviral medication for a viral infection and by resting and drinking plenty of fluids. Without other health problems you should respond well to treatment and soon recover, although your cough may last for some time.
Hospitalisation is usually only recommended for severe cases of pneumonia or where a baby is under two months old or an adult is elderly.
Prevention
ensuring good standards of hygiene helps prevent germs spreading. This includes covering your mouth and nose with a handkerchief or tissue when you cough or sneeze. You should throw away used tissues immediately as germs can live for several hours after they leave your nose or mouth. Wash your hands regularly. Live a healthy lifestyle. Stop smoking as it damages your lungs and increases the chance of infection. Too much and prolonged misuse of alcohol weakens your lungs' natural defences against infections, making you more vulnerable to pneumonia. If you are at high risk consider having pneumococcal and flu vaccinations.
Dealing with environmental factors such as indoor air pollution by, for example, using clean indoor stoves, and encouraging good hygiene in crowded homes reduces the risk of pneumonia infections.
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