



Viral Pneumonia

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What Is Viral Pneumonia?

Pneumonia is an infection that causes inflammation in your lungs. The three main causes of pneumonia are bacteria, fungi, or viruses.

Viral pneumonia is a complication of the viruses that cause colds and the flu. The virus invades your lungs and causes them to swell and block your flow of oxygen.

Pneumonia is a common and very serious disease. The flu is often the cause of pneumonia. The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) ranks pneumonia combined with the flu as the 8th leading cause of death in the U.S. every year.

Children and people over 65 are considered high-risk cases because their bodies are more susceptible to infection. Other high-risk groups include pregnant women and people who have weakened immune systems.

Many cases of viral pneumonia clear up within a few weeks. However, viral pneumonia can range from mild to severe. Severe cases can be life-threatening.

What Causes Viral Pneumonia?

There are a number of viruses that can lead to viral pneumonia, including:

- adenoviruses, which can also cause the common cold and bronchitis
- chickenpox
- flu
- respiratory syncytial virus, which causes cold-like symptoms

Researchers are not sure how these viruses cause pneumonia.

Coughing, sneezing, or touching a surface that has been contaminated by another infected person is the most common way to catch a virus that causes pneumonia.

Recognizing the Symptoms of Viral Pneumonia

The symptoms of pneumonia occur when your lungs become inflamed as they try to fight off the viral infection. This

inflammation blocks the flow of oxygen.

Pneumonia symptoms are a lot like flu symptoms. Most cases of viral pneumonia are mild. However, you should be aware that it could quickly develop into a more serious condition. Some common symptoms of pneumonia are:

- cough
- fever
- headache
- muscle pain
- fatigue
- shortness of breath
- constant fever of 102°F
- sweating
- shaking or chills
- blueness of the lips
- weakness

When to See Your Doctor

Pneumonia can be a very serious condition for certain groups of people. You may experience a severe case of pneumonia if:

- you're older than 65
- you're on breathing assistance using oxygen or other respiratory therapy
- you've had heart failure
- you have preexisting lung conditions, such as chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD)

Be on the lookout for symptoms of a severe case of pneumonia. You should go to the emergency room if you have:

- confusion
- rapid breathing
- a drop in blood pressure

Risks of Catching Viral Pneumonia

You're at a higher risk for developing pneumonia if you have a weakened immune system. There are also health conditions that put you at a higher risk for viral pneumonia.

These include:

- cancer or any other condition that's being treated with chemotherapy
- heart disease
- artery disease
- diabetes
- liver or kidney disease
- HIV and AIDS
- chronic bronchitis or emphysema
- recent upper respiratory tract infection, cold, or flu-like symptoms
- recent viral infection
- recent nausea and vomiting

How Is Viral Pneumonia Diagnosed?

Your doctor will ask you about your medical history and perform a physical exam. First, they'll listen to your lungs. Your doctor will be listening for the following sounds when you breathe:

- crackling
- bubbling
- rumbling
- wheezing

Your doctor will usually follow up with additional tests if they're concerned with the sounds that your lungs are making. These tests could include:

- a chest X-ray
- a complete blood count (CBC) test to distinguish between bacterial and viral infection
- a CT scan of your chest to check your lung function
- a sputum culture to test secretions from your lungs
- a nasal swab test to check for viruses such as the flu
- a bronchoscopy, which is rarely needed for diagnosing viral pneumonia but allows your doctor to look into your airways

How Do Doctors Treat Viral Pneumonia?

Treatment has two goals. It will help ease the symptoms of infection and rid your body of underlying infection.

Depending on the type of infection you have, your doctor may prescribe an antiviral medication. Antiviral medication doesn't work against most pneumonias, but it may be helpful if flu or herpes viruses cause your pneumonia. Your doctor may prescribe them if your condition is diagnosed early. It's important to understand that antibiotics will not treat viral pneumonia, because a virus, not bacteria, causes it.

To address your symptoms, your doctor may recommend:

- fever reducers like aspirin or ibuprofen
- cough medicine
- adequate amounts of rest
- drinking plenty of fluids
- oxygen therapy
- breathing treatments, such as using a humidifier
- pain medication to help deal with chest pain from frequent coughing

Most people can be treated at home, but people who are at risk for dehydration may need to stay in the hospital. Older adults and people with chronic health conditions are at risk of dehydration.

Staying Healthy and Preventing Pneumonia

There are some steps that you can take to prevent pneumonia. You should:

- practice good hygiene by washing your hands after using the bathroom or public transportation, or after you've been anywhere that has a high risk of contamination
- get adequate amounts of rest
- exercise and eat healthy

- practice courteous and safe sneezing and coughing by using the inner crook of your elbow when you sneeze or cough

Don't smoke because smoking damages your lung's ability to fight off infection.

Flu Vaccine

The flu virus can be a direct cause of viral pneumonia. The CDC says that everyone 6 months or older should get the seasonal flu vaccine. The only exceptions are people who have had allergic reactions to flu vaccines or eggs and people who have had Guillain-Barre syndrome.

If you're sick at the time you're supposed to get a flu shot, you should wait until you're feeling better to get it.

Recovering from Viral Pneumonia

Your recovery time depends on how healthy you were before you were diagnosed with viral pneumonia. A young, healthy adult will usually recover faster than other age groups. Most people recover in one to three weeks. Adults or seniors may take several weeks before they fully recover.

See your doctor if you think you have developed viral pneumonia. The best way to prevent pneumonia is to practice good hygiene and to get the seasonal flu shot every year.

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