

Pneumonia and Your Child

What Is Pneumonia?

Pneumonia is an inflammation of the lungs. When children get pneumonia the breathing tubes that carry air to the lungs get narrow and inflamed, and the air sacs where oxygen meets the bloodstream can fill with fluid.

Causes of Pneumonia

The most common causes of pneumonia in children are viral or bacterial infections. Less common causes of pneumonia in children are when the lungs are irritated by chemicals or other things inhaled into the lungs. Irritants may include chemicals (like spray from household cleaners), liquids (like swimming pool water or formula and other beverages), objects (like a small peanut or other food), or allergic triggers (like dust).

Types of Pneumonia

Pneumonia from infection is most common during the fall, winter, and early spring and can follow a cold, an ear infection, or a sore throat. Here are the types of pneumonia.

- Viral pneumonias do not improve with antibiotics. At home, make sure that your child gets rest, plenty of fluids, and, if needed, medicines to reduce fever.
- Bacterial pneumonias can be serious and should be treated with antibiotics right away. At home, make sure that your child gets rest, plenty of fluids, and, if needed, medicines to reduce fever.
- Pneumonia from irritants inhaled in the lungs is most common in children with special health care needs. This includes children with neuromuscular problems, like cerebral palsy.
- Allergic pneumonias are not common in children. When cases are reported it's often in dusty, rural areas.

Symptoms of Pneumonia

The symptoms of pneumonia are different for each child. Symptoms of pneumonia include

- Fever (may include chills).
- Cough.
- Trouble breathing (often breathing faster and more deeply than usual with occasional widening of the nostrils during deep breathing).
- Chest pain, especially when coughing or with deep breathing.
- Stomachaches or vomiting.
- Eating less or not eating.
- Headache.
- Loss of energy.
- Babies and toddlers' skin color may appear pale, gray, or yellowish, depending on their skin tone. Their bodies may appear limp, and they may cry more than usual.

When to Call the Doctor

Call the doctor if your child has any of the following signs:

- Especially fast or hard breathing (when you can see the chest drawing in and out)
- Repeated vomiting
- No energy to play or to keep up with daily routines
- Pale, gray, or blue-colored skin, lips, or nail beds, depending on their skin tone
- Stiff neck

Medicines

After an exam, the doctor may order a blood test or an x-ray to help them decide how to treat your child's infection.

If your child needs medicine, be sure you know the right amount, when to give the medicine, and if you should give food with it. Call the doctor or your pharmacist if you have any questions about the medicine.

Antibiotics

The doctor may prescribe an antibiotic if your child's pneumonia is caused by bacteria. An antiviral medicine may be prescribed if the pneumonia is caused by influenza.

Antibiotics and antivirals can be given in 3 ways.

- Oral (by mouth). Oral antibiotics can usually be taken at home. It's important that your child continue to take the antibiotic for the number of days prescribed even if your child feels better.
- Injection. Your doctor may suggest giving an antibiotic shot, especially if your child is having a lot of trouble with vomiting.
- IV (intravenous) tube. If your child is being treated in the hospital, the antibiotic may be given by vein through an IV tube.

Fever and Pain Medicine

Medicine may be recommended to decrease fever and aches. Call the doctor for fever lasting more than 2 or 3 days. Never give your child aspirin unless prescribed by the doctor. It can be dangerous for children younger than 18 years.

Note: A cough can last from days to weeks, but do not give your child cough medicine. Cough medicine doesn't work, and it may keep your child from coughing up mucus that needs to come out of the lungs.

Hospital Treatment

Your child may need to be treated at the hospital if they

- Cannot swallow the medicine.
- Are dehydrated and need fluids through an IV tube.
- Have severe breathing problems.
- Have problems fighting infections because their immune system doesn't work well.
- Have had pneumonia before.
- Have taken oral antibiotics but still have symptoms.

Treatments may include fluids and medicine through an IV tube or oxygen given through a face mask or a tube in the nose.

What You Can Do at Home

At home, you can

- Make sure your child drinks plenty of liquids to avoid getting dehydrated.
- Help your child rest.
- Give your child the medicine the doctor has recommended. (See *Medicines*.)

Visit [HealthyChildren.org](https://www.healthychildren.org) for more information.

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