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JAMA. 2000;283(6):832 (doi:10.1001/jama.283.6.832)

Online article and related content
current as of July 4, 2009.

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Diagnosing and treating pneumonia

You're coughing, you feel feverish, and your chest hurts. You may think you have a cold, but it could be more serious.

Pneumonia is a serious lung infection that needs to be diagnosed and treated early for the best chances of a quick recovery. Determining the cause of the pneumonia is an important first step, since pneumonia caused by bacteria needs to be treated with antibiotics. If you suspect that you may have pneumonia, you should consult

your doctor as soon as you can.

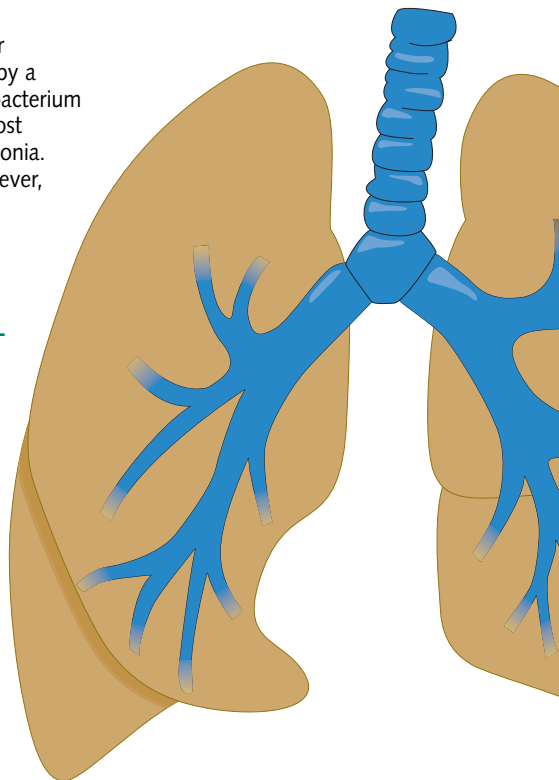
A study in the February 9, 2000, issue of *JAMA* evaluated whether using a set of management guidelines for diagnosing and treating pneumonia acquired outside of hospitals improved the treatment patients received. The researchers report that by following the management guidelines, fewer people with pneumonia were admitted into hospitals for treatment, and those who were admitted spent fewer days in the hospital.

WHAT IS PNEUMONIA?

Pneumonia is a serious infection or inflammation of the lungs caused by a virus, bacterium, or fungus. The bacterium known as ***Pneumococcus*** is the most common cause of bacterial pneumonia. Symptoms of pneumonia include fever, chills, cough, shortness of breath, chest pain, and increased **sputum** (mucus) production.

TRANSMISSION:

The bacteria or virus that causes pneumonia is spread when an infected person coughs, sneezes or comes in close contact with another person.



TREATMENT:

Pneumonia caused by *Pneumococcus* or other bacteria needs to be treated with antibiotics. Your doctor will determine the best course of treatment for your specific illness. Drugs are available to treat viral infections that cause some cases of pneumonia, but the effectiveness of these medications to treat pneumonia has not been studied.

PREVENTION:

The vaccine to help prevent pneumococcal pneumonia is safe and effective, and 1 shot lasts most people up to 10 years. It is recommended that everyone aged 65 or older should get the pneumococcal vaccine, as well as anyone with a chronic disease or weakened immune system. Also, persons who are aged 2 to 64 years who do not have spleens or have diseases of the spleen, and people living in nursing homes or long-term care facilities, should be vaccinated.

Pneumonia can also occur as a result of the flu. Getting a flu shot every year may help prevent pneumonia from occurring.

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

- American Lung Association
800/LUNG-USA or www.lungusa.org
- National Foundation for Infectious Diseases
4733 Bethesda Avenue, Suite 750
Bethesda, MD 20814-5228 or
www.nfid.org

INFORM YOURSELF:

To find this and previous *JAMA* Patient Pages, check out the AMA's Web site at www.ama-assn.org/consumer.htm.

Additional Sources: National Foundation for Infectious Diseases, National Institute on Aging, Administration on Aging, American Lung Association

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