

# Resource Article

# Pneumonia

Jody Collinge

## What Is Pneumonia?

Pneumonia is an infection of the lungs caused by germs such as bacteria, viruses, or fungi. Pneumonia spreads from person to person through germs in the air. Pneumonia is the leading cause of death of children around the world. So it is important when you work with children and teens to learn how to recognize and treat pneumonia. Pneumonia is usually treated with antibiotics.

## Does the Child Have Pneumonia or Just a Cold?

Many children and teens get coughs. But how do you know if the cough is pneumonia? And when does a cough require medical care? Colds are common, minor infections of the nose and throat. A child or teen with a cold often coughs because moisture is dripping down the back of her throat. Children and teens with colds can be cared for at home. A child or teen with a cold will have a runny nose, a low fever, and a sore throat. She will sneeze and lose her appetite. However, she will not be very sick.

Other health problems, such as asthma and croup, can also cause coughing and difficulty breathing.

## Symptoms of Pneumonia

- Cough
- Fever
- Chills
- Rapid breathing
- Difficulty breathing
- Loss of appetite

## Observe the Child or Teen

You can tell whether a child or teen with a cough has pneumonia or just a cold. Here are the danger signs for pneumonia.

- If a child or teen is very irritable or sleepy and not very responsive, she may have a bad disease and should be seen by a doctor or nurse at a medical clinic or hospital right away.
- Look for difficulty breathing. When a child or teen is calm and healthy, watch him breathe in and out. Normally, the chest and belly fill with air and move out when the child or teen takes a breath in. When a child or teen has severe pneumonia, the lungs become stiff. It is harder for him to breathe. Instead of breathing normally, this sick child or teen will pull in the chest below the ribs when he takes a breath. He is not able to fill his chest with air. This is a sign of severe pneumonia or another lung problem, such as asthma. This is a medical emergency. Take the child or teen for urgent medical care right away.

## **Bad Signs: Coughing and Fast Breathing**

Using a watch with a second hand, check to see how fast the child or teen is breathing. How many breaths does he take in a minute (60 seconds)? Infants (ages 2 months to 12 months) normally breathe fewer than 50 times per minute. An infant breathing more than 50 breaths per minute is breathing fast.

Toddlers and young children (ages 12 months to 5 years) normally breathe fewer than 40 times per minute. A child breathing more than 40 breaths per minute is breathing fast. Older teens and adults take 12 to 16 breaths per minute. If a teen or adult is breathing more than 25 breaths per minute, he is breathing fast.

A child or teen with a cough and fast breathing has pneumonia. He should be taken to the medical clinic as soon as possible. He may be treated with antibiotics. Children and teens with mild pneumonia breathe quickly but are alert and responsive. Usually children and teens with mild pneumonia can be treated at home.

### **Seek Medical Help if:**

- The child or teen has difficulty breathing or is breathing rapidly.
- He is very irritable or is difficult to wake up.
- Her lips or nails turn blue.
- He is not able to drink.
- Her cough lasts more than 1 week.
- He has an earache or his throat is very sore. (These may be signs of an ear or throat infection.)

### **Home Treatment of Colds and Mild Pneumonia:**

- Most children and teens with mild pneumonia will be treated with antibiotics.
- Children and teens with a simple cold do not need antibiotics.
- Do not give a child younger than 6 years old cough and cold medicines. They may cause serious side effects.
- You can give acetaminophen or ibuprofen if the child or teen has a fever and is uncomfortable.
- If a young child's nose is plugged, use saline (salt water) nose drops or nasal spray to clear her nose. Mix 1/4 teaspoon table salt in 1/2 cup clean water. Place 2 drops in each nostril, and then suction out the nose with a rubber suction bulb. This can be done before meals and before bedtime or as needed for congestion.