

## **About...*Pneumococcal Infections***

### **What are pneumococcal infections?**

Pneumococcal infections are infections caused by the bacterium *Streptococcus pneumoniae*. These infections include pneumonia, meningitis, sinus infections, and ear infections (Otitis Media), and are most common during the winter months. While anyone can become infected, children under 5 years of age, the elderly, and any individuals with weakened immune systems are at the greatest risk of becoming seriously ill. Pneumonia is a leading cause of death in the elderly.

### **What are the symptoms?**

Many people have pneumococcal bacteria in their bodies without having symptoms. Symptoms usually develop within 1-3 days following exposure and include:

- Chills
- Fever
- Cough
- Sneezing
- Chest pain
- "Rusty" looking phlegm
- Ear pressure or ear pain
- Sinus drainage or sinus pain

Persons with meningitis may experience fever, headache, sensitivity to light, and loss of alertness.

### **How are pneumococcal infections spread?**

The bacteria are spread from person to person by direct contact with secretions from an infected person's nose or throat. Coughing and sneezing by an infected individual can lead to the spread of the infection. However, in most cases, pneumococcal disease is not easily spread from one person to another. On rare occasions, outbreaks have occurred in settings where people live or work very closely together, e.g., daycare centers and correctional facilities.

### **How do I know if I have a pneumococcal infection?**

See your health care provider if you have been exposed to someone with a pneumococcal infection or if you have symptoms that match those described above. Many other organisms can cause these same symptoms.

### **How are pneumococcal infections treated?**

Pneumococcal infections can be successfully treated with appropriate antibiotics. However, pneumococcal bacteria are becoming increasingly resistant to antibiotics. If you have a serious pneumococcal infection, your health care provider will run special tests to make sure you receive the right medication.

You can help prevent drug resistance by taking the following steps:

- Take antibiotics only when prescribed by your health care provider.

- Take **all** doses **exactly** as prescribed.
- Do not take medication prescribed for anyone else.
- Do not ask your health care provider for antibiotics to treat viral infections, such as colds or influenza (the flu).

### **How can pneumococcal infections be prevented?**

Currently, two safe and effective vaccines are available to prevent pneumococcal infection. One is available for children ages 2 months to 4 years and is now recommended as part of routine childhood vaccinations. Another vaccine is available for persons over 65 years of age and those with weakened immune systems. All persons over age 65 are especially encouraged to have this vaccine to prevent pneumococcal pneumonia. See your health care provider to determine which vaccine is right for you or your child.

People who have been exposed to someone with a pneumococcal infection usually do not need to take medication themselves. The following hygiene habits will help prevent the spread of infection:

- Wash hands frequently and thoroughly, especially after coughing, sneezing, or caring for someone who is ill.
- Cough or sneeze into your upper sleeve.
- Discard used tissues and wash your hands.
- Do not share personal items such as toothbrushes.

For additional information on pneumococcal infections, please visit the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Web site at:

[http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dbmd/diseaseinfo/streppneum\\_t.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dbmd/diseaseinfo/streppneum_t.htm) .

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