



Identifying and Preventing Pneumonia

Pneumonia is a common infection of the lungs. It can happen to anyone and some people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) are at an increased risk of getting pneumonia. Pneumonia can become life-threatening if untreated. Recognizing the signs and symptoms can help prevent health complications, hospitalization, and death.

What is Pneumonia?

Pneumonia occurs when the air sacs in one or both lungs become inflamed and may fill with fluid or pus. Pneumonia can result in a range of mild to severe symptoms that can last for several weeks to months. Symptoms vary depending on age, overall health, and the type of germ that caused the infection.

Source: [CDC](#); [NHLBI](#)

Common Symptoms of Pneumonia

Pneumonia is common and can look like a cold or the flu. Understanding its early signs and symptoms can help the people you serve get appropriate medical treatment.

Signs and symptoms of pneumonia may include:

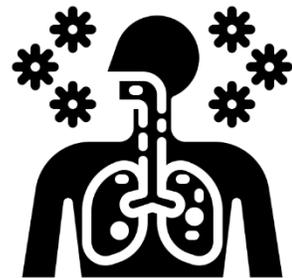
- Chest pain when breathing or coughing
- Cough, which may produce bloody or green mucus
- Fatigue
- Fever, sweating and chills
- Nausea, vomiting or diarrhea
- Shortness of breath or fast breathing
- Body pain
- Lower than normal body temperature (in adults over the age of 65 and people with weak immune systems), and
- Confusion or changes in mental awareness (in adults over the age of 65).



Source: [CDC](#); [NHLBI](#)

Some Causes of Pneumonia

- Breathing infected air particles or bacteria from the nose and throat into the lungs
- A viral upper respiratory infection, such as a cold or the flu
- Complications from illnesses like chickenpox
- Breathing food, gastric juices, or vomit into the lungs (aspiration pneumonia)
- Being on a ventilator if or when germs enter through the tube and get into the lungs (ventilator-associated pneumonia), or
- Poor oral care, oral or periodontal bacteria, and lack of regular dental visits.



Source: [NHLBI](#)

Statistics

- Pneumonia is very common and can lead to severe and life-threatening health complications.
- Pneumonia was diagnosed in **64%** of the special incidents reports for unplanned medical hospitalizations involving respiratory illnesses in Fiscal Year 2019/2020.
- Adults with IDD are more at risk of getting and dying from pneumonia.

Source: [DDS FY 2019/20](#); [Syracuse University](#)



Wellness and Safety Bulletins are produced by the Department of Developmental Services to alert direct service providers, regional center staff, and others to specific risks identified with our community. Please provide feedback on this bulletin and what we can do better through this survey: [Bulletin Survey](#)

Who is at Risk?

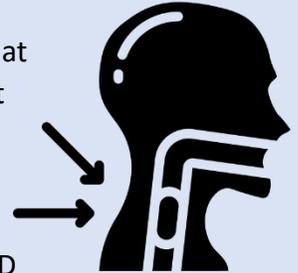
Although pneumonia can affect anyone, individuals at a higher risk include:

- People who have underlying medical conditions, like diabetes or heart disease
- People who are immunocompromised or have a weakened immune system
- Adults over the age of 65
- Children younger than age 2 with signs and symptoms of respiratory illness
- People who smoke or who are exposed to secondhand smoke
- People who live in congregate settings, like group homes, or who visit hospitals or healthcare settings often
- People who have workers or staff who help multiple people
- People who use ventilators
- People with dysphagia, and
- People at risk of aspiration.

Source: [NHLBI](#); DDS Clinical Services

Aspiration occurs when particles (such as food, drinks, or bodily fluids) are accidentally inhaled into the airway. It can lead to pneumonia and affects people with IDD at higher rates. Factors that make an individual more likely to aspirate include:

- Difficulty swallowing (dysphagia)
- Weakness or difficulty controlling the head or neck muscles
- Mobility limitations that prevent sitting upright
- Impaired awareness or consciousness
- Gastroesophageal Reflux Disease or GERD
- Eating too much food at once or too fast
- Dental problems preventing adequate chewing, or
- Small airways or large tongues.



Source: [Mount Sinai](#); DDS Clinical Services

Prevention and Action in Case of Pneumonia

Vaccination



- Talk with the doctor to see if you qualify for a vaccine.
- Vaccines are available to prevent some types of pneumonia and the flu.
- This is especially important for individuals who are at risk (not just adults over the age of 65).

Hygiene and Health Protection



- Avoid people who are sick, and stay away from others if you are sick.
- Practice proper oral care and hygiene, and encourage others to practice it too.
- Wash your hands regularly with soap and water or use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer.
- Clean and disinfect surfaces that are touched frequently.
- Don't smoke, and limit contact with cigarette smoke.
- Manage and treat medical conditions as advised by the doctor.

Action



- If individuals you serve show any difficulty breathing, chest pain, persistent fever of **102° F (39° C)** or higher, or persistent cough, especially if coughing up blood or pus, call the doctor immediately. It is especially important that people in high-risk groups seek prompt medical attention.
- If someone is in distress, call 911.

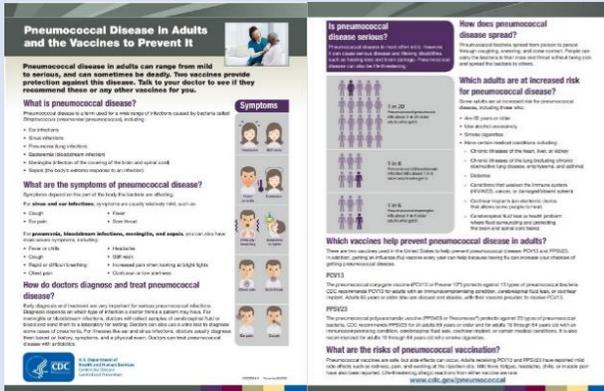
Source: [NHLBI](#); DDS Clinical Services



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Downloadable Fact Sheet



(Download fact sheet: [Pneumococcal Disease in Adults and the Vaccine to Prevent It](#))

Additional Resources

Immunization Schedule:

[2022 Recommended Child and Adolescent Immunization Schedule | CDC](#)

Vaccine Timing for Adults:

[Pneumococcal Vaccine Timing for Adults | CDC](#)

Respiratory Illnesses and Pneumonia:

[All about Respiratory Illnesses and Pneumonia | State of California](#)

Pneumonia:

[Pneumonia | NHLBI, NIH](#)

Remember to get your flu and pneumonia vaccines!



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