

Pneumococcal Disease - Causes, Symptoms, Risk factors and Preventions

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What is Pneumococcal Disease?

Pneumococcal (pronounced new-mo-cockle) disease describes a group of illnesses caused by the bacterium *Streptococcus pneumoniae*, also known as pneumococcus. *Streptococcus pneumoniae* are lancet-shaped, gram-positive, facultative anaerobic bacteria with 100 known serotypes. Most *S. pneumoniae* serotypes can cause disease, but only a minority of serotypes produce the majority of pneumococcal infections. Pneumococci are common inhabitants of the respiratory tract.

It is a serious infection that occurs most commonly in children, particularly those under 2 years of age. The Pneumococcal bug can cause meningitis (infection of the lining of the brain) pneumonia (infection of the lung) septicaemia (blood infection), as well as otitis media (infection in the middle ear).



What are these illnesses?

Pneumococcal Meningitis is an inflammation of the membranes that cover the brain and spinal cord. Your brain and spinal cord are responsible for everything you feel, think and do.

Meningitis can cause serious and sometimes permanent disabilities including hearing loss, paralysis, mental retardation and death. Symptoms include fever, lethargy or drowsiness, vomiting and stiff neck or legs.

Bacteraemia sometimes referred to as 'blood poisoning' occurs when bacteria enter the bloodstream and cause infection of the blood. Bacteraemia can also develop into meningitis. Symptoms include fever, irritability, rapid breathing and lack of ability to console your child.

Pneumonia, also known as inflammation of the lungs. Symptoms include cough, chest congestion, and production of phlegm, fever and chills/shaking. These illnesses can emerge rapidly. Identifying symptoms early and acting quickly is vital.

Otitis Media or Middle Ear infection can also result from infection with *Streptococcus pneumoniae*, although there are several other causes of this illness. Symptoms include earache, fever and frequent tugging of the ear.

How serious is Pneumococcal Disease?

Pneumococcal disease can be very serious. It may cause permanent hearing loss, brain damage and death.

Pneumococcal disease can impact the quality of life for a child and the entire family. Just think of the time spent nursing an ill child; the trips to the doctor, absence from work, even getting a young child to take medication can be time-consuming. If the child requires hospitalization, the burden and the worry can be even greater.

Risk factors for invasive Pneumococcal Disease in infants and young children

Some groups are at particularly high risks:

- Age
- Recent day-care attendance.
- At least one recent course of antibiotics.
- History of recent ear infection.

- Other groups at high risk include children with chronic disease or those who are immuno-compromised.

How do children catch Pneumococcal Disease?

The Pneumococcal bug is carried in the nose and throat of healthy adults and children. It can be passed from one child to another in droplets that are released into the air by sneezing and coughing.

Most children become carriers at some time or other-but not all will become sick.

Pneumococcal disease is more common in young children than adults because young children lack the right type of antibodies to fight the bacteria.

How do you treat and prevent Pneumococcal Disease?

Meningitis and septicaemia can develop very quickly so it is vital that treatment is provided without delay.

Antibiotics are used to treat these diseases and are effective in most cases if started in time.

However, a small number of bacteria are resistant to some antibiotics, which results in longer periods in hospital with greater cost. Further, in many parts of the world, the widespread use of antibiotics has caused them to be increasingly ineffective. This is a growing concern in the case of Pneumococcal disease. Pneumococcal disease can be prevented by a series of vaccination for your children.

What are the benefits of vaccination against Pneumococcal Disease?

Vaccination can help prevent the disease as well as reduce the spread of the bacteria to other children. Vaccination may also reduce antibiotic resistance. Vaccination against Pneumococcal disease can save lives!

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