

Get the Facts about Pneumonia and Pneumococcal Vaccine

What is pneumonia?

Pneumococcal disease is a leading cause of serious illness in children and adults throughout the world. The disease is caused by a common bacterium, the pneumococcus, which can attack different parts of the body. When bacteria invade the lungs, they cause the most common form of community-acquired bacterial pneumonia. When bacteria invade the bloodstream, they cause a condition called bacteremia. When they invade the covering of the brain, they cause meningitis. Pneumococci may also cause otitis media (middle ear infection) and sinusitis. Currently there are more than 90 known pneumococcal types; the ten most common types account for approximately 62 percent of invasive disease worldwide. Death from pneumonia is one of the most common causes of death in America from a vaccine-preventable disease.

What are symptoms of pneumonia?

Symptoms of pneumococcal pneumonia include high fever, cough, and shortness of breath.

How is pneumonia transmitted?

Pneumococcus bacteria exists in many people's noses and throats and is spread by coughing, sneezing, or contact with respiratory secretions. It is unknown why these bacteria sometimes suddenly invade the body and cause disease.

Who is at risk for pneumonia?

Anyone can get pneumonia. However, some groups are at particularly high risk for pneumonia or its complications. These groups include:

- Persons aged 65 and older;
- Individuals with weak immune systems due to cancer, leukemia, Hodgkin's disease or human immunodeficiency virus (HIV);
- Persons with sickle cell disease or without a functioning spleen;
- Individuals who have a chronic illness such as lung, heart, and kidney disease, diabetes and alcoholism;
- Persons living in special environments or communities, such as Alaskan Natives and certain American Indian populations; and
- Residents of chronic or long-term care facilities.

How can I protect myself and my family from pneumonia?

The best way to protect against pneumonia is through vaccination. There are two types of pneumococcal vaccines currently available: a polysaccharide vaccine and a conjugate vaccine. The polysaccharide vaccine is used in adults and the conjugate vaccine is used in children. The polysaccharide has been available in the United States for more than 20 years. Yet in 2000, only 53 percent of those 65 years of age and older reported ever receiving the pneumococcal vaccine, according to the CDC.