



# Pneumococcal Disease

## Health Education Facts

### **What is pneumococcal disease?**

Pneumococcal disease is a severe bacterial infection caused by *Streptococcus pneumoniae* also called pneumococcus. It may cause pneumonia, meningitis, or a blood stream infection (bacteremia).

### **Who gets pneumococcal disease?**

Although anyone can get pneumococcal disease, it tends to occur in the elderly or in people with serious underlying medical conditions such as chronic lung, heart, or kidney disease. Others at risk include alcoholics, diabetics, people with weakened immune systems and those without a spleen.

### **How is the disease transmitted?**

The pneumococcus is spread by airborne or direct exposure to respiratory droplets from a person who is infected or carrying the bacteria.

### **When does pneumococcal disease occur?**

Infections occur most often during the winter and early spring and less frequently during the summer.

### **How soon after exposure do the symptoms appear?**

The incubation period may vary, but it is generally one to three days.

### **What are the symptoms of pneumococcal disease?**

Symptoms may include fever, chills, headache, cough, chest pain, disorientation, shortness of breath and occasionally a stiff neck.

### **How is pneumococcal disease diagnosed?**

Doctors are able to diagnose pneumococcal disease based on the type of symptoms exhibited by the patient and specific laboratory cultures of sputum, blood or spinal fluid.

### **How is it treated?**

Prompt treatment with antibiotics, such as penicillin or cephalosporin, is usually effective. However, penicillin-resistant strains of pneumococcus have been reported that may require the use of other antibiotics.

### **Is there a vaccine to prevent infection?**

Yes. A reasonably effective vaccine has been available for a number of years. Although it is safe, fairly effective, and inexpensive, it is underutilized. Patients in high-risk categories should ask their health care provider or local health department about pneumococcal vaccine.