



Milton Keynes  
University Hospital  
NHS Foundation Trust

# Chest Infection /pneumonia

A guide for parents



## What is a chest infection?

A Chest Infection is inflammation or infection in one or both of the lungs, (sometimes called pneumonia) in children this can be caused by Viruses or Bacteria. Viruses are the most common cause of a chest infection in children. Often this develops after an infection in the upper respiratory tract (nose and throat). This causes fluid to collect in the lungs, making it hard to breathe. Chest infections can be mild and will resolve on their own. However, in more serious cases children may need to be treated in hospital.

## What are the signs and symptoms of a chest infection (pneumonia?)

The signs and symptoms depend on what caused the infection and the age of the child. A bacterial chest infection usually begins more quickly than if its viral. Your child may have one of the following:

- Generally unwell
- High Temperature/fever
- Fast and/or difficulty in breathing cough
- Weakness
- Vomiting
- Tummy aches or pains
- Chest pain especially when coughing
- Feeling tired
- Reduced appetite



## What treatments are available?

Chest infections are treated with antibiotics. Most of the time oral antibiotics will be enough but if your child is very unwell, has complications or cannot tolerate oral medication, they might require antibiotics given through a vein. The doctor will determine if your child has a chest infection by asking you questions and examining your child. The doctor will listen to your child's chest using a stethoscope, they are listening for any crackling or rattling sounds.

If your child is suspected of having a chest infection, the doctor may want to do some blood tests to help find the likely cause (i.e bacteria or virus) A chest x-ray maybe taken to confirm the diagnosis and the extent of the infection. Your child may require physiotherapy to help remove secretions from their chest or to help produce a cough. Sometimes children may require oxygen therapy to help them breath more easily. Children who are unable to maintain their fluid intake due to breathlessness, fatigue or vomiting may require fluid therapy. Different positions may help your child with secretion clearance and improve breathing in children who have respiratory distress.

## What can I expect as a parent and what can I do to help?

If your child has a chest infection you can help them by doing the following:

- Ensure they get plenty of rest
- Offer small amounts of fluid often, to avoid dehydration
- Get them to sleep propped up on pillows if over the age of one year, which may be more comfortable.
- Where possible encourage the child to move around at regular intervals to facilitate deep breathing which will help clear secretions. If they are unable then ensure they regularly change position throughout the day.
- Offer paracetamol and ibuprofen for fever and discomfort
- Do not give cough medicines
- Do not smoke around your child and avoid environments where adults may be smoking.

Sometimes children can refuse to eat, this can be concerning for parents but your child will eat again once they feel better, it is more important to try and encourage your child to drink small amounts of fluids little and often. The cough can linger for a couple of weeks. It is very important to continue the whole course of antibiotics even if your child seems remarkably better. We hope that this information has helped to answer some of the questions you may have had regarding your child's illness.

# Red flags

## If your child has any one of these below

Is going blue around the lips A harsh noise as they breath in (stridor) present all of the time (even when they are not upset).

Has pauses in their breathing (apnoeas) or has an irregular breathing pattern

Is too breathless to talk/eat or drink. Becomes pale, mottled and feels abnormally cold to touch.

Becomes extremely agitated (crying inconsolably despite distraction), confused or very drowsy (difficult to wake).

Develops a rash that does not disappear with pressure (the 'Glass Test') Is under 1 month of age with a temperature of 38°C /100.4°F or above.

You need urgent help. Go to the nearest Hospital Emergency (A&E) Department or phone 999.

## If your child has any one of these below

Has laboured/rapid breathing or they are working hard to breath – drawing in of the muscles below their lower ribs, at their neck or between their ribs.

A harsh breath noise as they breath in (stridor) present only when they are upset.

Seems dehydrated (dry mouth, sunken eyes, no tears, drowsy or passing less urine than usual).

Is becoming drowsy (excessively sleepy). Has difficulty swallowing saliva.

Is 1–3 months of age with a temperature of 38°C/100.4°F or above or 3–6 months of age with a temperature of 39°C/102.2°F or above (but fever is common in babies up to 2 days after they receive vaccinations). Seems to be getting worse or if you are worried.

You need to contact a doctor or nurse today. Please ring your GP surgery or call NHS 111 – dial 111.

## If none of the features in the red or amber boxes above are present

Self Care Continue providing your child's care at home. If you are still concerned about your child, call NHS 111 – dial 111.

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[www.mkhcharity.org.uk](http://www.mkhcharity.org.uk)

