Pneumonia

What is pneumonia?
Pneumonia is an infection in your lungs that makes it hard for you to breathe. It can be caused by a virus, bacteria, or fungus. You may have a fever, chills, or cough; breathe rapidly; or feel short of breath. You may also cough up mucus, feel sick to your stomach, or vomit. If you have these symptoms, call your healthcare provider right away.

How will my healthcare provider know I have pneumonia?
First, your healthcare provider will examine you, including listening to your lungs, and you’ll have a chest X-ray. The healthcare provider may take a sample of mucus from your lungs and order blood tests to decide the best treatment for you.

How is pneumonia treated?
Treatment for pneumonia depends on its cause, how sick you are, your age, and your overall health. Your healthcare provider will prescribe medicine to treat the pneumonia; the type will depend on whether it’s caused by bacteria, a virus, or fungus. You may also receive medicine to loosen up the mucus in your lungs. If you’re having a lot of trouble breathing, you may be admitted to the hospital for oxygen and I.V. medication until you feel better.

Here are some things you can do to get better faster:
• Get plenty of rest. Getting enough sleep will give your body the strength it needs to fight the illness.
• Take deep breaths and cough several times each hour to loosen up mucus and get it out of your lungs.
• Wash your hands with soap and water or use an alcohol-based hand rub after blowing your nose or using the bathroom, and before eating.
• Cough or sneeze into a tissue or into your elbow or sleeve.
• If you smoke, stop. Ask your healthcare provider about support groups, medicines, and other ways to help you quit smoking.
• Drink several glasses of water a day. Fluids help thin and loosen up the mucus in your lungs and throat.
• Eat a balanced diet so your body can work its best and heal quickly.

What do I do if I don’t feel better?
You should start to feel better 2 to 3 days after starting your treatment. If you still have a severe cough, trouble breathing, or fever, call your healthcare provider. To make sure you’re getting better, contact your healthcare provider in 2 days to share how you’re feeling. You’ll normally see your healthcare provider in 2 to 3 weeks for a follow-up visit. Expect to get another chest X-ray in 4 to 6 weeks to make sure the pneumonia is gone.

What can I do to avoid getting pneumonia?
• Get a flu vaccine. A flu virus is a common cause of pneumonia, so a yearly flu vaccine may help you stay well.
• Don’t smoke and avoid other people’s smoke. Smoke bothers your lungs and makes it harder for them to fight off infections.
• Keep asthma under control. If you have asthma, follow your treatment plan. You may need extra medicine to open up your airways.
• Get a pneumonia vaccine. Your healthcare provider may suggest this vaccine if you’re 65 or older, have a chronic disease (such as lung, heart, or kidney disease; sickle-cell anemia; or diabetes), or are getting over a severe illness. You shouldn’t get the vaccine if you’re sick or pregnant.
• Stay active. Even a little exercise may help your lungs fight off infections in the future.

This patient-education guide has been adapted for the 5th-grade level using the Flesch-Kincaid and SMOG formulas. It may be photocopied for clinical use or adapted to meet your facility’s requirements. Selected references are available upon request.