UNDERSTANDING PNEUMONIA

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Pneumonia is an infection of the lungs that affects millions of people every year. Pneumonia can occur in one or both lungs. To help understand pneumonia, let's take an inside look to see how our healthy lungs work.

When you breathe in, oxygen-rich air travels down your windpipe, or trachea, and into your lungs, which are divided into two bronchial tubes. These tubes are further divided into smaller branches.

At the end of those branches sit several million microscopic air sacs, called alveoli. It is within the alveoli that oxygen entering your bloodstream is exchanged with carbon dioxide – the air you breathe out.

However, when you have pneumonia, some of your alveoli become infected. They fill with fluid and mucus, and are not able to exchange the oxygen and carbon dioxide efficiently. Your lungs need to work harder; breathing becomes more difficult.

Symptoms of pneumonia include: a fever, feeling tired or fatigued, muscle aches, coughing that brings up an increase in the amount of mucus, a change in mucus color or thickness, shortness of breath and painful breathing. You may also experience an increased heart rate, loss of appetite, confusion, and vomiting. The severity and number of symptoms you have depends on the location and size of the area of your lungs that are infected.

But how do your lungs become infected in the first place? There are two common types of pneumonia: community-acquired and hospital-acquired pneumonia. Community-acquired pneumonia occurs when the virus is passed from person-to-person while going about the activities of daily living.

Hospital-acquired pneumonia, on the other hand, occurs in a patient already hospitalized for another condition. This sometimes develops about three days after the patient has been admitted into a healthcare facility. There are several reasons why this might happen.

Patients in the hospital are at higher risk for developing pneumonia because their bodies often have a harder time fighting off infection. Also, the treatments some patients receive for other conditions may put them at higher risk. Lack of activity when you're lying in bed for long periods of time, lack of deep breathing, drug therapy, and highly resistant germs can all contribute to hospital-acquired pneumonia.

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People at high risk for pneumonia include those with lowered immune systems, whose bodies have difficulty fighting germs; smokers; people over 65 or babies under 2; people with chronic lung disease, such as asthma or COPD; and those with heart disease.

Notify your healthcare provider right away if you suspect that you may have pneumonia. With prompt and proper treatment, you'll feel better soon.