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Reducing your pneumonia risk

Mount Alvernia Hospital's respiratory specialist Dr Lim Hui Fang explains more about the infection and how the pneumococcal vaccine can help

Flu-like symptoms that don't seem to go away could be a sign of a more serious infection, like pneumonia. **PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES**

Cough, lots of mucus and a high fever — these may sound like the symptoms of a common flu or cold but when severe and persistent, they might suggest a more serious condition such as pneumonia.

Pneumonia can result in breathlessness, respiratory failure and in some cases, even lead to death.

In Singapore, the second highest cause of death from 2020 to 2022 is pneumonia, according to the Ministry of Health[1].

Dr Lim Hui Fang, respiratory physician and intensivist from Mount Alvernia Hospital, explains how pneumonia is different from the common flu or cold and the importance of the pneumococcal shot.

Q How different is pneumonia from the common flu or cold?

The common flu or cold affects the upper airway resulting in fever, sore throat and runny nose. Pneumonia affects the lower airway when the air sacs in the lungs are filled with mucus and pus, causing more severe symptoms such as breathlessness, chest tightness, severe lethargy and occasionally confusion.

Both flu and cold, as well as pneumonia, can be caused by viruses or bacteria. However, how severely the individual is affected depends on his or her general state of health.

Mild cases of pneumonia can resolve with a short course of antibiotics or antiviral medication, however in severe cases, it may result in respiratory failure and multi-organ failure.

Q Which groups of people does pneumonia usually affect?

Those more susceptible include the elderly, smokers, patients with chronic medical diseases such as diabetes, cancer, and those with chronic diseases affecting the lung, kidney and liver.

They have lower immunity, which makes them prone to infections. They may also have poorer organ function which puts them at higher risk of sepsis-induced organ failure.

Q When and how often should you get the pneumococcal vaccine?

Older adults and those with the above-mentioned chronic medical diseases are at greatest risk of serious illness and death when they contract pneumonia. They can reduce their risk with a pneumococcal vaccine.

The Singapore National Adult Immunisation Schedule recommends that adults aged 65 and above get two doses of the pneumococcal vaccine (PCV 13 and PPSV 23), one dose per year over two years.

Alternatively, the US Centre of Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends a single dose of the PCV20 vaccine, which is available here in some private clinics.

However, younger adults with chronic diseases that can lower their immunity should also check with their doctor if they should take the pneumococcal vaccine.

Q How does the pneumococcal vaccine protect you from pneumonia?

Pneumococcal vaccines can help to prevent invasive pneumococcal disease caused by the bacterium Streptococcus pneumoniae, by up to 75 per cent. This bacterium is the most common cause (about 60 per cent) of community-acquired pneumonia cases.

However, you can still contract pneumonia caused by other viruses or bacteria. Nonetheless, the risk of developing severe complications and death is reduced with the vaccine.

1 *https://www.moh.gov.sg/resources-statistics/singapore-health-facts/principal-causes-of-death*

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