

Pneumococcal Disease

(Illnesses Caused by *Streptococcus pneumoniae*)

What is pneumococcal disease?

Pneumococcal disease is an infection caused by the bacteria *Streptococcus pneumoniae*. It is also called *pneumococcus* and can cause pneumonia, earaches (otitis media), meningitis, and other diseases.

When does it occur?

Pneumococcal disease can happen any time of the year.

What are the symptoms?

Symptoms of fever and irritability may occur in any of the diseases caused by pneumococcus. The symptoms of meningitis include high fever, stiff neck, and headache in anyone over 2 years of age. In tiny babies, the symptoms may only be that the baby is less active, irritable, vomiting, or feeding poorly.

The symptoms of pneumonia in children include fever, cough, rapid breathing or grunting. Otitis media causes painful ears and eardrums that are red and swollen. Children may also have sleeplessness, fever, and irritability.

Is it contagious? How is it spread?

Pneumococcus is spread by contact with people who have a pneumococcal illness or who carry the bacteria in their throats without being sick. The respiratory droplets coming from the noses or mouths of these people are infectious.

How serious is pneumococcal disease?

Pneumococcal disease is a very serious illness for young children. In the United States, it is estimated that pneumococcal infections cause 200 deaths, 700 cases of meningitis, 17,000 blood infections, and 4.9 million ear infections each year in children under 5 years old.

How can you prevent pneumococcal disease?

Although this bacterium is often resistant to penicillin, pneumococcal disease can be treated with antibiotics. Pneumococcal diseases may be prevented in immunized children. The vaccine Prevnar® should be given to all infants less than 24 months old and at 2, 4, and 6 months of age, followed by a booster at 12-15 months. If a child is less than 2 years old and has never received this vaccine, there are schedules of when to give the shots to protect them. There is also a vaccine Pneumovax® for children older than 2 years, adults over 65 years, and persons without good immune systems.