FACT SHEET: *Mycoplasma Pneumoniae* (Walking Pneumonia)

May 2025

WHAT IS WALKING PNEUMONIA?

Walking pneumonia, caused by the bacterium *Mycoplasma pneumoniae*, is a lung infection that primarily affects school-aged children and young adults. It is called "walking pneumonia" because it is generally milder than other forms of bacterial pneumonia. The infection can involve both the upper and lower respiratory tracts and may also lead to tracheobronchitis (chest cold). *M. Pneumoniae* infections tend to occur in the late summer and early fall but can happen year-round.

WHO GETS MYCOPLASMA PNEUMONIA INFECTION?

Anyone can get infected, but it most commonly occurs among children ages 5-17 and young adults.

WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS OF WALKING PNEUMONIA?

The symptoms are gradual, usually beginning with a nonproductive cough, scratchy sore throat, or earache. Other symptoms include fever, chills, malaise, myalgias, sore chest, and shortening of breath. The disease is resolved spontaneously in 10-14 days. Most preschool children infected with M. pneumoniae are asymptomatic.

WHO IS AT RISK FOR COMPLICATIONS FROM WALKING PNEUMONIA?

Children with asthma, kidney disease, sickle cell disease, or weakened immune system are at higher risk of complications, especially children and those over age 65. These complications include asthma exacerbation, severe pneumonia, respiratory failure, and encephalitis (brain disease).

HOW IS WALKING PNEUMONIA SPREAD?

Mycoplasma pneumoniae is spread through respiratory droplets when infected people talk, cough, or sneeze. Transmission requires prolonged close contact with an infected person.

HOW SOON DO SYMPTOMS APPEAR?

The incubation period for *M. pneumoniae* is typically 1 to 4 weeks, allowing the bacteria to spread easily and cause outbreaks in settings like college residence halls, correctional facilities, schools, childcare centers, and nursing homes. Since coughing symptoms often persist for an extended time, outbreaks can last longer. While only 10% of infected individuals develop pneumonia, those with symptoms can spread the infection as long as their cough persists.

HOW IS PNEUMONIA DIAGNOSED?

Pneumonia is diagnosed by evaluating symptoms such as cough, fever, and difficulty breathing, along with a physical examination. Diagnostic tools like chest X-rays, blood tests, and sputum (mucus) samples help identify lung infections and their potential causes. Walking pneumonia can be confirmed through nasal and throat swab tests.

HOW IS WALKING PNEUMONIA TREATED AND IS THERE A VACCINE?

Walking pneumonia is typically treated with antibiotics to shorten the duration of symptoms, although the disease often resolves on its own. Hospitalization is rarely required, and currently, there is no vaccine available to prevent it.

SHOULD A PERSON WITH WALKING PNEUMONIA BE EXCLUDED FROM WORK OR SCHOOL?

Exclusion from childcare or preschool attendance is not necessary for children diagnosed with walking pneumonia.

HOW CAN WALKING PNEUMONIA BE PREVENTED?

To effectively prevent the spread of bacteria, it is important to adopt a few key practices:

- Wash your hands frequently with soap and water, scrubbing your hands for at least 20 seconds.
- Cover your mouth and nose with a tissue when you cough or sneeze.
- Clean and disinfect frequently touched surfaces and objects, such as toys, doorknobs, tables, and counters.

Doctors typically do not prescribe antibiotics after exposure to prevent *M. pneumoniae* infection, except for people at higher risk of severe illness, like children with sickle cell disease who have been in close contact with someone infected.

WANT MORE INFORMATION?

Information about walking pneumonia and other related health topics can be found at CDC.gov. The DC Department of Health promotes the health and safety of the District residents. For additional information, please visit dchealth.dc.gov or call (202) 442-5865.

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