

Aspiration Pneumonia

KEY POINTS

- Aspiration pneumonia is an infection of the lungs caused by breathing something other than air into your lungs, such as food, liquid, vomit, or pills.
 - Treatment may include oxygen, a tube in your throat to help you breathe, medicines, or a procedure to clear your lungs. More than one treatment may be used.
 - You can reduce your risk of aspiration pneumonia if you limit the amount of food or fluid you put in your mouth at one time. Avoid combining eating with overuse of alcohol or recreational drugs.
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What is aspiration pneumonia?

Aspiration pneumonia is an infection of the lungs. Aspiration means breathing something other than air into your lungs, such as food, liquid, vomit, or pills.

What is the cause?

When a foreign substance gets into your lungs, bacteria can grow and cause a lung infection.

Your risk of aspiration pneumonia is higher if you:

- Have been unconscious
- Have problems with choking or do not have a good gag reflex, which can happen after stroke, brain injury, or disease of the nervous system
- Have problems with swallowing
- Abuse drugs or alcohol
- You are fed through a nasal or gastrostomy tube, and tube feeding backs up into your lungs

What are the symptoms?

Symptoms may include:

- Fever
- Trouble breathing
- Chest pain when you breathe or cough
- Cough that brings up bad-smelling mucus from the lungs
- Severe tiredness

How is it diagnosed?

Your healthcare provider will ask about your symptoms and medical history and examine you. Tests may include:

- Blood tests
- Sputum culture, which is a test of a sample of mucus coughed up from deep in your lungs
- Chest X-ray
- CT scan, which uses X-rays and a computer to show detailed pictures of your chest
- Thoracentesis, which uses a needle inserted through a space between your ribs to draw out fluid from your lung. The fluid can be tested for problems such as infection.
- Bronchoscopy, which uses a flexible, lighted tube passed through your mouth and down into your lungs to see abnormal areas. You will get numbing medicine or anesthesia before the bronchoscopy. A biopsy may be taken during the bronchoscopy to help make a diagnosis. A biopsy is the removal of a small sample of tissue for testing.

If you have a swallowing problem, you may have swallowing tests to check on the cause and severity of the problem.

How is it treated?

Depending on how sick you are, you may need to be in the hospital. Treatment may include:

- Giving you oxygen to breathe
- Having a tube in your throat and a machine to help you breathe and to make sure you are getting enough oxygen
- Giving you IV fluids and antibiotic medicines to treat infection and inhaled medicines to open up the airway
- Thoracentesis, which uses a needle inserted through a space between your ribs to draw out fluid or air. You will feel some immediate relief, but it may take several days for your lung to completely fill with air again.
- If pneumonia is causing a continuing buildup of fluid or pus in the space between your lungs and your ribcage, you may need a flexible tube inserted between your ribs into your chest. This is called a chest tube. Suction is often used to help drain infected fluid from the space between your rib cage and lungs. The tube will be removed when the infection is better.

You often will need several weeks of treatment with an antibiotic or other medicines. With treatment, you may recover in 1 to 4 weeks. If you are over 60 years old or have other medical problems, it may take longer to get your strength back and feel normal.

How can I take care of myself?

Follow the full course of treatment prescribed by your healthcare provider. In addition:

- If you are taking an antibiotic, take the medicine for as long as your healthcare provider prescribes, even if you feel better. If you stop taking the medicine too soon, you may not kill all of the bacteria and you may get sick again.
- Drink more liquids (water or tea) every day to help you cough up mucus more easily unless your provider has told you to limit your fluids.
- Cough up mucus as much as possible. Use cough medicine only if your provider recommends it.
- Don't smoke, and stay away from others who are smoking.
- Avoid breathing dust and chemical fumes.
- Get extra rest.
- Use a humidifier to put more moisture in the air. Avoid steam vaporizers because they can cause burns. Be sure to keep the humidifier clean, as recommended in the manufacturer's instructions. It's important to keep the water container clean to prevent bacteria and mold from growing in it.
- If needed, take nonprescription pain medicine, such as acetaminophen, ibuprofen, or naproxen. Read the label and take as directed. Unless recommended by your healthcare provider, you should not take these medicines for more than 10 days.
 - Nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory medicines (NSAIDs), such as ibuprofen, naproxen, and aspirin, may cause stomach bleeding and other problems. These risks increase with age.
 - Acetaminophen may cause liver damage or other problems. Unless recommended by your provider, don't take more than 3000 milligrams (mg) in 24 hours. To make sure you don't take too much, check other medicines you take to see if they also contain acetaminophen. Ask your provider if you need to avoid drinking alcohol while taking this medicine.
- Contact your healthcare provider if you have new or worsening symptoms.

Ask your provider:

- How and when you will get your test results
- How long it will take to recover
- If there are activities you should avoid and when you can return to normal activities
- How to take care of yourself at home
- What symptoms or problems you should watch for and what to do if you have them

Make sure you know when you should come back for a checkup. Keep all appointments for provider visits or tests.

How can I help prevent aspiration pneumonia?

Follow these precautions to keep from breathing substances into your airways:

- Don't talk or laugh when you are drinking or have food in your mouth.
- Limit the amount of food or fluid you put in your mouth at one time.

- Avoid foods that you have trouble swallowing. If you have trouble swallowing a medicine, ask your healthcare provider if there is a different form of the medicine that may be easier for you to swallow.
- If you have a swallowing problem, you can learn ways to eat and drink that avoid choking and help keep you from breathing in food or saliva. Ask your healthcare provider about seeing an occupational therapist or other specialist.
- Do not eat during the times that you are taking medicines that may make you drowsy.
- Avoid combining eating with overuse of alcohol or recreational drugs. If you have a problem with alcohol or drug abuse, seek counseling and treatment.

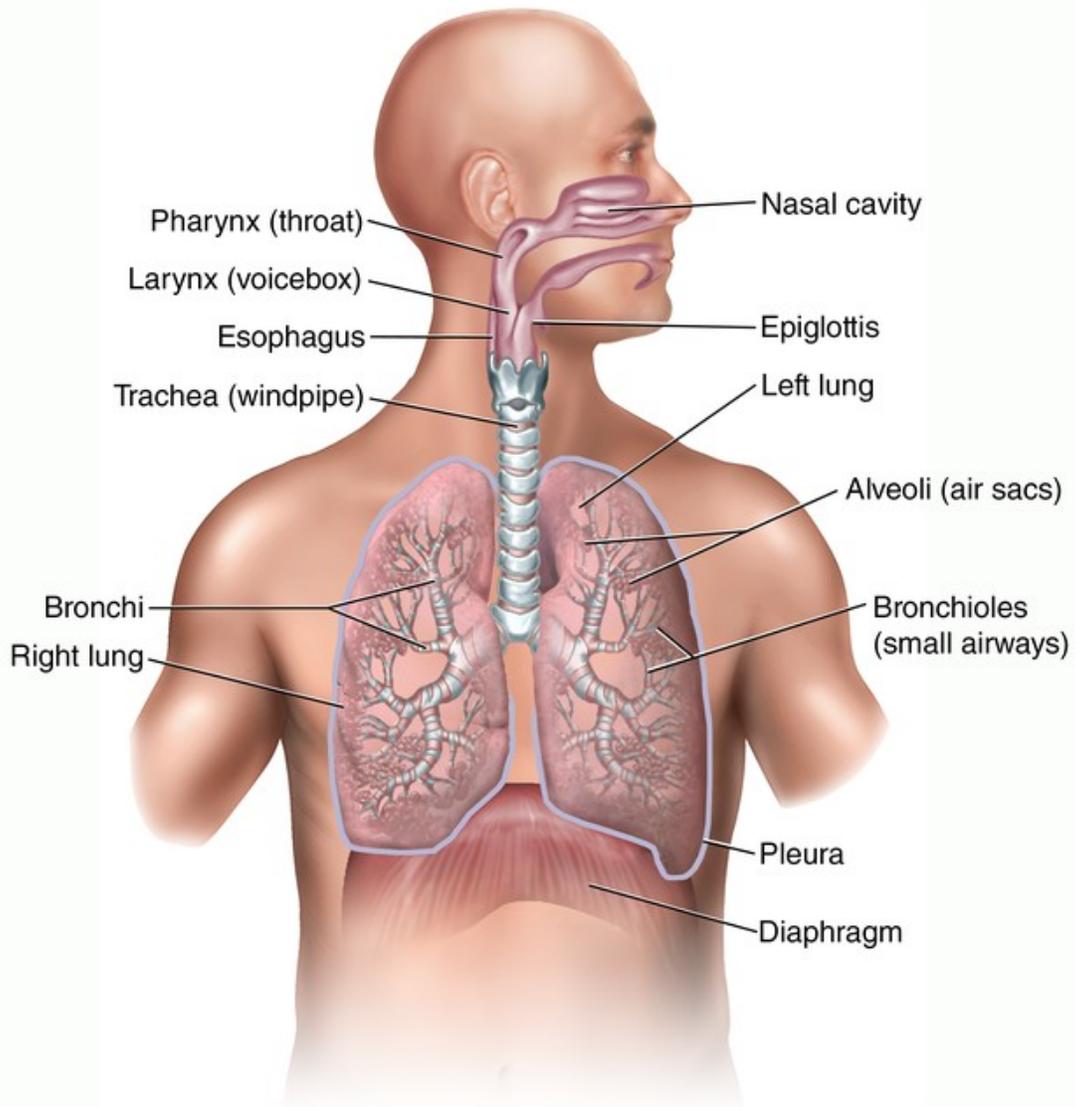
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