



Patient education: Aspiration pneumonia (The Basics)

Written by the doctors and editors at UpToDate

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What is aspiration pneumonia?

Aspiration pneumonia happens when a substance that should not be in the lungs gets into the lungs and causes problems ([figure 1](#)).

Normally, the body can keep foods, liquids, bacteria, and other things out of the lungs and airways (the tubes that carry air inside the lungs). But if the body accidentally lets these things into the lungs, they can do 1 or more of the following:

- Damage the lung tissue
- Cause an infection (called "pneumonia")
- Block an airway

Some people are more likely to get aspiration pneumonia, such as those who:

- Are sleepy from surgery, or have passed out from alcohol or drugs
 - Have problems with swallowing, like because of a stroke or brain damage
 - Have certain conditions affecting their stomach or esophagus
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What are the symptoms of aspiration pneumonia?

Symptoms depend partly on what's causing the aspiration pneumonia. They can include:

- Fever
- Cough – People might cough up mucus that smells bad, or is yellow or green or bloody.
- Trouble breathing or catching your breath
- Fast breathing
- Noisy breathing (wheezing)
- Bluish-looking lips or skin

Should I call my doctor or nurse?

Yes. Call your doctor or nurse if you have the symptoms listed above, especially if they started after you choked on food or drink.

Will I need tests?

Probably. Your doctor or nurse will ask about your symptoms and do an exam. To look for a problem in your lungs, they might do 1 or more of the following tests:

- Chest X-ray
 - CT scan of your chest – This is an imaging test that creates pictures of the inside of your body.
 - Lab tests – These can include blood or urine tests, or tests on a sample of the mucus you cough up.
 - Bronchoscopy – This is a procedure in which a doctor puts a thin tube with a camera on the end (called a "bronchoscope") in your mouth and down into your airways. Then, they look inside your airways and lungs.
 - Tests to check for swallowing problems
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How is aspiration pneumonia treated?

Treatment depends on your symptoms and what's causing your aspiration pneumonia. Some people need to be treated in the hospital, at least at first.

If you have an infection, your doctor will treat it with antibiotic medicines. The antibiotic your doctor chooses will depend on the kind of bacteria causing your infection. Sometimes, antibiotics need to be given through a thin tube that goes into a vein, called an "IV."

If an object is blocking your airway, your doctor can try to remove the object during bronchoscopy.

Some people with aspiration pneumonia need extra oxygen. Your doctor will give you extra oxygen if you are not getting enough oxygen when you breathe normally.

Can aspiration pneumonia be prevented?

Sometimes. Some people with long-term swallowing problems can help prevent aspiration pneumonia by changing what and how they eat and drink. If your doctor recommends making these changes, they will have you work with a speech therapist who has experience in this area. Another way to help prevent aspiration pneumonia is to raise the head of your bed, or sleep on extra pillows, so you aren't lying flat.

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This topic retrieved from UpToDate on: Jan 04, 2025.

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Topic 16957 Version 13.0

GRAPHICS

Pneumonia



Pneumonia is an infection of the lungs. When you have pneumonia, the air sacs in your lungs become inflamed. They can fill with fluid and cells trying to fight the infection. This can make it hard to breathe.

Graphic 55943 Version 9.0



