

House Calls

by Rikki Schuster

With the chilly weather approaching (hopefully not as cold as last year), we'll tend to stay indoors more than we would like. Unfortunately, that makes us all a little more prone to catching pneumonia.

I know, your mother always told you that you got pneumonia by going outside with your hair wet. Well, I hate to say your mother was wrong, but pneumonia is actually an infection and inflammation of the lungs caused by bacterial germs. It can affect all ages, but is most severe in young children and adults over age 60.

Risks of getting pneumonia increases significantly with smoking, chronic illnesses that lower your resistance, such as cancer, heart failure, or diabetes, poor general health, crowded or unsanitary living conditions, alcoholism, and recent hospitalization.

Frequent signs and symptoms of pneumonia are high fever (greater than 102 degrees), cough with sputum that is thick and discolored, rapid breathing, chest pains that increase with deep breathing, and generalized fatigue.

The best way to prevent pneumonia is to obtain prompt medical treatment for any sign of a respiratory infection, and avoid the preventable risk factors listed previously. You may want to arrange for the pneumococcal vaccine (pneumonia shot) if you are at increased risk by contacting your primary care medical provider. Usually you only need one dose of the pneumococcal vaccine; however, some people need two doses depending on when their first dose was obtained. Most adults who get the vaccine develop protection to most types of the pneumococcal bacteria within two to three weeks after getting the shot.

If you feel that you have signs

and symptoms of pneumonia, you should seek medical attention as soon as possible. Tests may be indicated such as blood work or chest x-rays to help with the diagnosis of pneumonia.

You will more than likely be placed on an antibiotic if your health care provider finds it appropriate. If so, please remember to take every one of your antibiotics until they are gone, not just until you are feeling better. Remember that antibiotics do not cure viruses, so if your medical provider has reason to believe your illness is viral in nature, he/she may only provide supportive measures for your recovery.

You may want to use a cool-mist ultrasonic humidifier to increase air moisture, but remember to clean it properly every day to avoid bacterial contamination. You may want to use a cough suppressant if your cough is dry, non-productive, and painful. You don't always want to use cough suppressants if you are experiencing a productive cough, since that type of cough is useful in ridding the lungs of the congestion. If you are unsure, it is always best to consult your health care provider for advice.

A heating pad or hot compresses usually helps relieve the chest discomfort that is produced by pneumonia. Pneumonia is usually curable in one to two weeks with treatment, but may take longer for the very young and elderly.

You should notify your medical provider immediately if you develop increased shortness of breath, pain not relieved by heat or prescribed medications, bluish fingernails or skin, blood in the sputum, or any new or unexplained symptoms develop.

By the way, it's probably not a good idea to go outside with your

hair wet anyway, just because your mother told you so! Happy Holidays!

Rikki Schuster provides Medical House Calls for acute, non-life threatening illnesses in your home, workplace, hotel, or vacation cottage. She is a certified Physician Assistant with eight years of Emergency Medicine and Urgent Care experience, including over three years on the Outer Banks. She may be contacted by calling 252-475-2007 seven days a week.