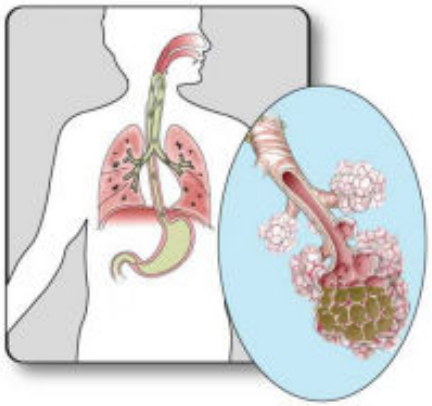
Aspiration Pneumonia

Aspiration pneumonia is an infection in your lungs. It occurs when you breathe (*aspirate*) things into your lungs such as food, vomit or liquid. When these things get into your lungs, swelling (*inflammation*) can occur. This can make it difficult for you to breath. Aspiration pneumonia is a serious condition and can be life threatening.



CAUSES

Aspiration pneumonia can have many causes. Some of the causes include:

- Having a brain injury or disease:
  - Stroke.
  - Seizures.
  - Confusion (*Dementia*).
  - ALS (Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis, or Lou Gehrig's disease).
  - Parkinson's disease.
- Other causes of aspiration pneumonia:
  - Being under general anesthesia.
  - Being in a coma (*unconscious*). This unconscious state can be caused by drugs, injury or disease. Being in a coma can decrease a person's gag reflex, which can make it easier for aspiration to occur.
  - A narrowing of the esophagus (the tube that carries food to the stomach).
  - Having dental problems that make it hard to swallow.
  - Drinking too much alcohol. If a person passes out and vomits, vomit can be swallowed into the lungs.
  - Taking certain medications. Tranquilizers and sedatives can sometimes decrease your swallowing or gag reflex.

SYMPTOMS

- Coughing after swallowing food or liquids.
- Breathing problems. These could include wheezing (a whistling sound) or shortness of breath.
- Bluish skin. This can be caused by lack of oxygen.
- Fever.
- Chest pain.
- Coughing up food or mucus. The mucus might contain blood, pus or greenish material.
- Fatigue (being more tired than usual).
- Sweating more than usual.
- Bad breath.

DIAGNOSIS

A physical examination and testing will be needed to see if aspiration pneumonia is present. This can include:

- A review of the above symptoms.
- Chest X-ray. This gives a picture of the lungs.
- Listening through a stethoscope. The healthcare provider will listen for:
  - Crackling sounds in the lungs.
  - Decreased breath sounds.
  - A rapid heartbeat.
- Swallowing study. This test looks at how food is swallowed and whether it goes into your breathing tube (*trachea*) or food pipe (*esophagus*).
- Sputum culture. *Sputum* (saliva and mucus) is collected from the lungs or *bronchi* (tubes that carry air to the lungs). It is then tested for bacteria.
- Computed tomography. This is called a CT scan. It also can show lung damage.
- Bronchoscopy. This test uses a flexible tube (a bronchoscope) to see inside the lungs.

TREATMENT

Treatment will depend on how severe the aspiration pneumonia is and what led to it.

- Some people may need to be treated in the hospital. Your breathing will be carefully monitored. Depending on how well you are breathing, you may:
  - Be able to breath on your own but need oxygen.
  - Need breathing support via a breathing machine. (*ventilator*).
- Medication:
  - Antibiotics or anti-fungal drugs might be prescribed. The particular medicine will depend on what caused the infection.
  - Other drugs may be given to reduce fever and/or pain.
- Other treatments or corrections may be needed. For example:
  - Following a recommended diet. This is especially important if the swallowing study was failed.
  - Revising medications.
  - Fixing dental problems.
  - Correcting breathing obstructions.
  - Treating stomach disorders.
  - Dealing with alcohol issues.
  - Having a feeding tube placed in the stomach.

HOME CARE INSTRUCTIONS

- Take any medicines that were prescribed. Follow the directions carefully.
- Check with your caregiver before taking over-the-counter medications.
- Rest as instructed by your caregiver.
- Keep all follow-up appointments with your healthcare provider. This is important so the caregiver can make sure the pneumonia is gone.

SEEK MEDICAL CARE IF:

Any of these symptoms return:

- Shortness of breath or difficulty breathing.
- Wheezing.
- Fever of more than 100.5° F (38.1° C) or as recommended by your caregiver.
- Chest pain.

MAKE SURE YOU:

- Understand these instructions.
- Will watch your condition.
- Will get help right away if you are not doing well or get worse.

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