

## Patient information

# Signs and symptoms of chest infections



### Chest infection

If you have been diagnosed with a lung condition you can be at greater risk of contracting a chest infection.

Chest infections can be caused by a **virus, bacteria or fungus** and can occur anywhere from the nose to the lung tissue itself.

They are the commonest cause of a 'flare-up' or 'exacerbation' of your lung disease and are the most common acute problem treated in hospitals. With every 'flare-up' or chest infection your lung function will deteriorate a little more.

With all this in mind it is important for you to spot the signs and symptoms of an infection and to know what to do and when.

**Remember, the earlier an infection is treated the more quickly you are likely to recover.**

### Pneumonia

Pneumonia begins with either a bacterial, viral or fungal lung infection. This causes the alveoli (air sacs) in the lungs to become inflamed and fill with fluid. It can occur in one lung or both. Pneumonia can make you ill very quickly and can be fatal, so it is very important to seek advice quickly if you think you may have it.

### Symptoms of pneumonia include:

- A very high temperature
- Sweating and shivering
- Rapid heartbeat

- Sharp, stabbing chest pain
- Quick, shallow breaths
- Breathlessness at rest
- A dry, irritable cough
- Delirium or confusion



## **Signs and symptoms of a chest infection**

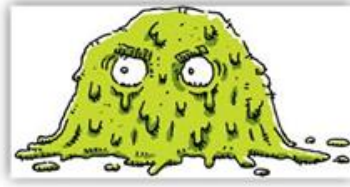
- Change in colour of phlegm
- Change in quantity of phlegm
- Change in consistency of phlegm
- Increased breathlessness
- Increased wheeze
- A high temperature, or more hot sweats / flushes than normal
- Increased tiredness or sleeping more often
- Difficulty getting air in
- Increased use of reliever (blue) inhaler
- Decreased effectiveness of inhalers
- Loss of appetite
- Increased use of home oxygen
- Reduced exercise tolerance (tasks are more effortful)
- Cough - can be dry or productive
- Chest pain or tightness
- Rapid heartbeat
- Increased confusion or disorientation

**You may have one or more of these symptoms if you have an infection.**

## **Phlegm (sputum)**

If you are someone who regularly expectorates (cough up) phlegm it is a useful way to keep an eye on the health of your lungs.

The colour, quantity and consistency of your phlegm are important factors that can indicate whether there may be a problem.



## Phlegm colour

- **White / clear:** This is the normal colour of phlegm.
- **Brown:** If you have recently given up smoking or are still smoking then your phlegm may be brownish in colour.
- **Green:** Any shade of green that persists for more than a day, from the palest to the darkest, indicates that you have an active chest infection. This means that a visit to your GP would be advisable as antibiotics and / or steroids may be needed. Take a sputum specimen with you if you can.
- **Yellow:** Any shade of yellow, from the palest cream to the darkest, means an old infection. This is the more common colour to see as it can often take a while to start to clear the infected phlegm from your chest. Be aware that an old infection can become active again if it has not been fully cured.
- **Clear and frothy:** This can indicate that you may have some fluid in your lungs. This is especially important to keep an eye on if you are someone who suffers with swollen hands and feet or are on water tablets. Please visit your GP if you are concerned.

## Quantity

Most people who expectorate phlegm frequently will know their usual 'amount' that they bring up daily and usually at what time of the day. Sometimes when an infection begins the quantity and frequency of the phlegm can increase.

## Consistency

Often phlegm can get thicker, stickier and more difficult to clear if an infection is imminent.

## Antibiotics and steroids

If your GP or respiratory nurse diagnoses you with a '**bacterial**' chest infection then they may prescribe you a course of antibiotics with or without steroids.

Please be aware that if you are diagnosed with a **viral** infection, antibiotics will not help and you will be advised to take regular paracetamol and fluids and let your

body's immune system tackle this type of infection.

## **Antibiotics**

These medications help kill the bacteria in your phlegm.

It is important that you take this medication as prescribed and finish the full course (even if you feel better beforehand).

Antibiotics can be prescribed with or without steroids.

It is vitally important that you do not consume any alcohol when taking antibiotics as this can stop them from working properly and will take longer for your infection to clear up.

## **Steroids**

Sometimes, if you have inflammation in your lungs, you will be given a course of steroids to help open the airways in your lungs and make your breathing easier. These can be prescribed with or without antibiotics.

## **Rescue packs of antibiotics and steroids**

If you regularly have more than four chest infections per year then you may be given a 'rescue pack' of antibiotics and / or steroids to keep at home. These can be used if you suspect you have an infection, but are unable to get an appointment with your GP immediately.

Please be sure to inform your GP or respiratory nurse that you have started your rescue pack.

## **Recurrent infections**

Sometimes chest infections can be difficult to treat and will require more than one course of antibiotics or a change of antibiotics. Please be sure to return to your GP if:

- Your symptoms return after you have finished your full course of antibiotics
- You feel no better after taking the full course of antibiotics
- **You are someone who regularly coughs when they eat or drink**

## **How to clear your chest**

Clearing phlegm from your chest is important so that your breathing improves and so that the bacteria do not cause too much damage to your lungs. This process

should be as effortless as possible.

It is good to start this process by loosening the phlegm to make it easier to remove.

## Steaming

This 'old fashioned' technique is very effective at helping to clear thick phlegm from your chest and your sinuses.

Fill a large bowl with hot water (you may add eucalyptus oil to the water if you wish). Sit with your face about 30cm above the steaming bowl and breathe in the vapour for about 5 minutes. This can be repeated 3 - 4 times per day if necessary.

## Mucolytics

Sometimes clearing thick phlegm may require a more regular intervention. Please ask your GP or respiratory nurse about mucolytic medication (Carbocisteine) that can be taken daily to help with this problem.

## Pineapple juice

For a more natural remedy for loosening your phlegm try drinking a couple of mouthfuls of pineapple juice once or twice per day. This fruit juice contains an enzyme which helps to thin the phlegm. **Please make sure that you are allowed to take this with your current medication before starting it.**

## Coughing

Increased coughing during an infection can be painful, exhausting and inconvenient.

- Drink plenty to prevent your throat becoming dry and irritated
- Try to 'huff' rather than cough
- Support your chest when coughing

If you have an irritable, tickly cough which is uncontrollable then try taking very small and frequent sips of water, **or** suck a boiled sweet, **or** take a simple linctus to try to relieve the irritation.

## Huffing

This is a less tiring but just as effective way to clear the phlegm from your lungs. Start by taking a deep breath in, followed by a hard and fast breath out through an open mouth (as if steaming up a mirror). Your physiotherapist will show you how

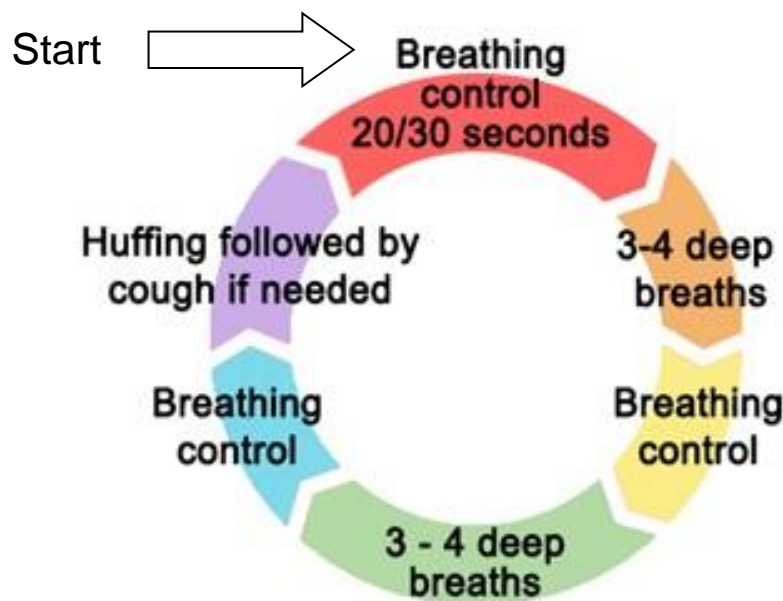
to do this.

## Chest clearance techniques

### Active cycle of breathing technique (ACBT)

Trying to cough up phlegm can be tiring and unproductive. The active cycle of breathing technique uses different depths of breathing to move phlegm from the smaller airways at the bottom of your lungs to the larger airways at the top of the lungs where you can then huff or cough to clear it.

This exercise should be performed in a relaxed position (sitting or side-lying) with your shoulders relaxed.



This cycle can be repeated several times to help clear your phlegm. Your physiotherapist will guide you on this.

### Bubble PEP

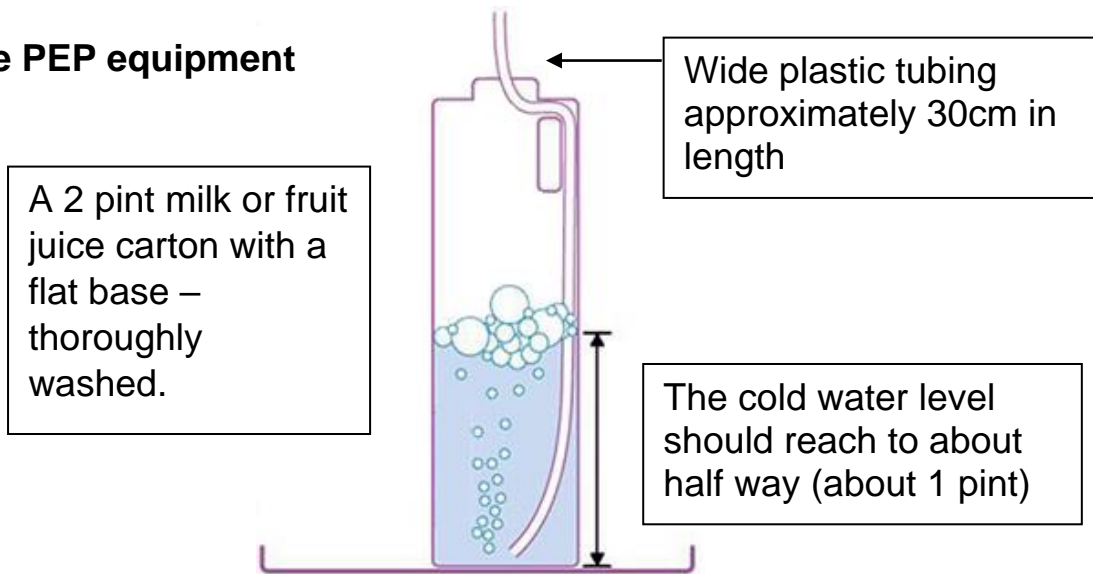
This is a very easy and effective technique to help you clear the phlegm from your chest. It will also help to strengthen your lungs.

PEP is short for positive expiratory pressure. Bubble PEP is a technique used to help adults or children who have a build-up of phlegm (secretions) in their lungs and struggle to clear them. The technique involves blowing bubbles through water.

As you blow out and make bubbles in the water, a positive pressure is created within the tubing and transferred into the airways in your lungs. This positive pressure helps to hold open your airways, allowing more air to flow in and out. The air can then get behind the phlegm helping to move it more easily upwards

through the open airways. You should then be able to cough or huff and clear the phlegm from your lungs.

### Bubble PEP equipment



- Take a **deep breath** in (without the tubing in your mouth).
- **Blow out** through the tubing (creating bubbles in the water) for as long as possible.
- Repeat this \_\_\_\_\_ times, making sure that you catch your breath between each blow out. This is one cycle.
- Then huff or cough to try and clear your phlegm – as instructed by your physiotherapist.
- Always try to spit the phlegm out rather than swallow it.
- You can repeat the cycle as necessary or as instructed by your physiotherapist

**Please be sure to wash out the equipment after use**

### Other tips to help manage your chest during an infection

- Keep well hydrated: you should drink approximately 2 litres of fluid per day unless you are on fluid restriction.
- Eat little and often to maintain the energy to fight the infection
- Rest frequently and keep tasks to a minimum to conserve energy
- Use your 'positions of ease' to help with breathlessness
- Raise the head of the bed when sleeping to make breathing easier



## Useful contacts

**Suffolk Community Healthcare Care Co-ordination Centre (CCC):** for pulmonary rehabilitation

Tel: 0300 123 2425

**Physiotherapy department:** for physiotherapy

West Suffolk NHS Foundation Trust

Hardwick Lane

Bury St Edmunds

Suffolk

IP33 2QZ

Tel: 01284 713300

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*<https://www.accessable.co.uk/organisations/west-suffolk-nhs-foundation-trust>*



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