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FREE PROFESSIONAL RESOURCE

Pneumonia & Respiratory Infection Awareness in Care Settings

A Practical Guide for Care Staff

Knowledge Hub Resource 070

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Introduction

Respiratory infections are infections affecting the **airways, lungs or other parts of the respiratory system**. They may be caused by viruses or bacteria and can vary considerably in severity.

Some respiratory infections are relatively mild, while others can lead to serious illness. **Pneumonia** is an infection affecting the lungs and can be particularly serious for older adults, people who are frail and individuals living with long-term health conditions.

Care staff should understand that an individual who develops a respiratory infection may deteriorate quickly. Recognising changes from the person's normal condition and reporting concerns promptly can therefore be extremely important.

Why This Resource Matters

Understanding respiratory infection and pneumonia awareness helps care staff to:

- Recognise possible signs and symptoms of respiratory infection.
- Understand what pneumonia is.
- Recognise individuals who may be at increased risk of serious illness.
- Observe changes in breathing, coughing and general wellbeing.
- Recognise that symptoms may present differently in some older or frail individuals.
- Support appropriate nutrition and hydration according to the individual's care plan.
- Follow good infection prevention and control procedures.
- Recognise significant or rapid deterioration.
- Understand the relationship between serious infection and possible sepsis.
- Record and report concerns accurately.
- Know when urgent or emergency medical assistance may be required.

Possible Signs and Symptoms

Symptoms of a respiratory infection can vary depending on the cause and the individual.

Possible symptoms may include:

- A new or worsening cough.
- Increased breathlessness.
- Faster or more difficult breathing.
- Wheezing.
- Producing more sputum or phlegm than usual.
- Changes in the colour, thickness or amount of sputum.
- Fever or feeling unusually hot.
- Shivering or feeling unusually cold.
- Chest discomfort or pain.
- Increased tiredness or weakness.
- Headache or muscle aches.
- Reduced appetite.
- Reduced food or fluid intake.
- Feeling generally unwell.

Not everyone will experience all of these symptoms.

What Is Pneumonia?

Pneumonia is an infection that causes inflammation within the lungs. The small air sacs within the lungs can become inflamed and may fill with fluid, making breathing more difficult.

Pneumonia can range from mild illness to a **serious and potentially life-threatening infection**.

People who may be at increased risk of becoming seriously unwell include:

- Older adults.
- People who are frail.
- Individuals with chronic lung conditions such as COPD.
- People with heart disease or other significant long-term conditions.
- Individuals with a weakened immune system.
- People with swallowing difficulties who are at risk of aspiration.
- People who smoke.

Risk varies between individuals and should always be considered alongside their overall health and care needs.

Symptoms May Be Less Obvious

Some older or frail individuals may not always develop the symptoms people commonly associate with a chest infection.

A significant change might instead include:

- Increased confusion.
- Unusual drowsiness.
- Reduced mobility.
- Loss of appetite.
- Reduced fluid intake.
- Increased weakness.
- A noticeable decline in everyday functioning.
- Becoming generally more unwell than usual.

Sudden confusion should **not automatically be attributed to dementia or normal ageing**. It may indicate delirium associated with infection or another acute health problem and should be reported promptly.

Key Message

Know what is normal for the individual.

A new cough, increased breathlessness or fever may be noticeable signs of respiratory infection, but deterioration can sometimes be less obvious.

Changes in **alertness, mobility, appetite, breathing or general functioning** may also be important.

Care staff should **observe the whole person, record significant changes and report concerns promptly rather than attempting to diagnose the cause.**

Supporting an Individual with a Respiratory Infection

The effects of a respiratory infection can vary considerably between individuals. Some people may experience relatively mild symptoms, while others may become significantly unwell.

Older people, individuals who are frail and those with existing heart or lung conditions may have **less reserve to cope with an infection**, making careful observation particularly important.

Care staff should follow the individual's care plan, support comfort and wellbeing, and report significant changes promptly.

Supporting Breathing and Comfort

An individual experiencing coughing or breathlessness may feel anxious, tired or uncomfortable.

Care staff can help by:

- Remaining calm and reassuring.
- Encouraging the individual to rest appropriately.
- Supporting a comfortable position that helps their breathing, according to their care plan and preferences.
- Avoiding unnecessary physical exertion when the person is unwell.
- Ensuring prescribed inhalers, oxygen or other respiratory treatments are supported only in accordance with the care plan and staff responsibilities.
- Observing for increasing breathlessness or changes in breathing.
- Reporting new or worsening symptoms promptly.

Never independently change prescribed oxygen flow rates, inhaler doses or other respiratory treatment unless specifically authorised within an appropriate clinical plan.

Supporting Hydration and Nutrition

Respiratory infections can reduce appetite and make eating and drinking more difficult, particularly when an individual is tired, breathless or generally unwell.

Where appropriate to the individual's care plan:

- Offer drinks regularly.
- Ensure drinks are easily accessible.
- Support small, manageable meals or snacks if appetite is reduced.
- Allow sufficient time for eating and drinking.
- Monitor food and fluid intake where required.
- Report significantly reduced intake.
- Follow prescribed fluid restrictions or specialist nutritional requirements.

Individuals with dysphagia must always receive food and drinks at their **prescribed IDDSI level** and according to their swallowing care plan.

Respiratory Infection and Dysphagia

People with swallowing difficulties may be at risk of food, drink, saliva or other material entering the airway. This is known as **aspiration**.

Aspiration can sometimes contribute to **aspiration pneumonia**.

Care staff supporting someone with dysphagia should:

- Follow the individual's swallowing and mealtime care plan.
- Provide the prescribed food texture and drink thickness.
- Follow recommended positioning and mealtime strategies.
- Never independently alter an individual's IDDSI level.
- Observe for coughing, choking, wet or gurgly voice, breathlessness or other changes associated with eating and drinking.
- Report new or worsening swallowing concerns promptly.

Preventing the Spread of Respiratory Infection

Respiratory infections can spread between people, making good infection prevention particularly important in care environments.

Staff should:

- Perform effective hand hygiene at appropriate times.
- Follow organisational PPE requirements.
- Encourage good respiratory hygiene where the individual is able to participate.
- Dispose of used tissues appropriately.
- Clean frequently touched surfaces and shared equipment according to organisational procedures.
- Follow appropriate laundry and waste procedures.
- Follow isolation or additional infection-control precautions where these have been implemented.
- Report clusters of illness or possible outbreaks according to organisational procedures.
- Stay informed about current workplace infection prevention policies.

Prescribed Medication and Treatment

Treatment depends on the cause and severity of the respiratory infection.

An individual may be prescribed medication or other treatment by an appropriate healthcare professional.

Care staff should:

- Follow the prescription and Medication Administration Record (**MAR**) accurately.
- Support medication only when trained, competent and authorised.
- Never give antibiotics prescribed for another person or left over from a previous illness.
- Never independently start, stop or alter prescribed treatment.
- Observe for possible side effects or deterioration.
- Report concerns promptly.

Antibiotics do not treat viral infections and should only be used when prescribed for the individual.

Recognising Deterioration

Be particularly alert if the individual develops:

- Increasing or severe breathlessness.
- Faster, more laboured or otherwise noticeably altered breathing.
- Increasing drowsiness or difficulty staying awake.
- New or worsening confusion.
- Significant weakness or reduced mobility.
- Persistent fever, shivering or feeling very unwell.
- Chest pain.
- Significantly reduced food or fluid intake.
- Reduced urine output.
- Blue, grey or unusually pale lips or skin.
- A rapid overall decline in their condition.

These changes require **prompt escalation according to the individual's care plan and organisational procedures**.

Remember

A respiratory infection can change quickly.

Do not focus only on coughing or temperature. Changes in **breathing, alertness, mobility, eating, drinking and general behaviour** may all provide important information about an individual's condition.

Know what is normal for the person, observe carefully, record accurately and **report deterioration promptly**.

Professional Responsibilities

Care staff have an important role in recognising when an individual with a respiratory infection may be becoming more unwell. Changes in breathing can sometimes develop quickly, particularly in older people, individuals who are frail and those living with existing heart or lung conditions.

As a care professional, you should always:

- Treat the individual with dignity, patience and respect.
- Know what is normal for the person's breathing, mobility and general wellbeing.
- Follow the individual's care plan and prescribed treatment arrangements.
- Observe for new or worsening coughing, breathlessness or changes in sputum.
- Be alert to changes in alertness, behaviour, appetite, mobility and fluid intake.
- Follow prescribed respiratory monitoring arrangements where these form part of the care plan.
- Support medication, inhalers or other treatment only when trained, competent and authorised.
- Never independently alter prescribed oxygen, medication or respiratory treatment.
- Follow infection prevention and control procedures.
- Follow the individual's swallowing care plan where dysphagia is present.
- Record relevant observations accurately and objectively.
- Report significant changes promptly.
- Follow organisational escalation and emergency procedures.

When to Raise Concerns

Report concerns promptly if the individual:

- Develops a new or significantly worsening cough.
- Becomes more breathless than usual.
- Develops faster, more laboured or noticeably altered breathing.
- Develops fever, shivering or feels unusually hot or cold.
- Develops new or worsening chest discomfort.
- Produces significantly more sputum or there is a noticeable change from their usual sputum.
- Becomes increasingly tired or weak.
- Develops new or worsening confusion.
- Becomes unusually drowsy or difficult to engage.
- Has significantly reduced food or fluid intake.
- Passes substantially less urine than usual.
- Experiences a significant reduction in mobility or everyday functioning.
- Develops new or worsening swallowing difficulties.
- Shows any other significant deterioration from their usual condition.

Care staff should **report what they observe rather than attempt to diagnose pneumonia or determine the cause of the respiratory symptoms**.

When to Call 999

Some symptoms may indicate a **serious respiratory or other medical emergency**.

Call **999** if the individual:

- Is severely struggling to breathe.
- Develops sudden or severe chest pain.
- Has blue, grey or unusually pale lips, tongue or skin alongside serious illness.
- Collapses, loses consciousness or is difficult to wake.
- Develops severe or rapidly worsening confusion alongside other signs of serious illness.
- Appears critically unwell or is deteriorating rapidly.
- Has symptoms that make you suspect **sepsis or another life-threatening emergency**.
- Has any other symptoms that make you believe their life is at immediate risk.

Follow organisational emergency procedures while awaiting assistance.

Respiratory Infections and Sepsis

Pneumonia and other infections can sometimes contribute to **sepsis**, a life-threatening reaction to infection.

Possible signs of serious deterioration can include:

- Severe breathlessness or very fast breathing.
- New or severe confusion.
- Extreme drowsiness or difficulty waking.
- Blue, grey, pale or markedly mottled skin, lips or tongue.
- Severe shivering or appearing extremely unwell.
- Very little or no urine output.
- Collapse or loss of consciousness.
- Rapid deterioration in the individual's overall condition.

Do not wait for every possible symptom to appear before escalating a serious concern.

Recording and Reporting

When reporting a change, useful information may include:

- What has changed from the individual's usual condition.
- When the symptoms or changes were first noticed.
- Changes in breathing or breathlessness.
- Characteristics of coughing or sputum where relevant.
- Temperature and other observations where staff are trained and authorised to undertake them.
- Changes in alertness or behaviour.
- Changes in mobility or everyday functioning.
- Food and fluid intake.
- Urine output where this is being monitored.
- Any difficulties with eating, drinking or swallowing.
- Prescribed treatment already being received.

Clear and factual information can help healthcare professionals assess the individual appropriately.

Good Practice Reminder

Look at the whole person — not simply the cough.

For an older or frail individual, deterioration from pneumonia or another respiratory infection may also appear as **increased confusion, weakness, reduced mobility, poor appetite, drowsiness or a general decline**.

Knowing what is normal for the individual and **recognising, recording and reporting changes promptly** are important parts of safe care.

Summary

Respiratory infections affect the airways or lungs and can range from relatively mild illnesses to serious conditions requiring urgent medical treatment.

Pneumonia is an infection affecting the lungs and can be particularly serious for older adults, people who are frail and individuals living with other long-term health conditions.

Possible symptoms include coughing, breathlessness, fever, chest discomfort, increased tiredness and reduced appetite. However, some older or frail individuals may show less obvious changes such as **increased confusion, drowsiness, weakness, reduced mobility or a decline in eating and drinking**.

Care staff play an important role by knowing what is normal for the individual, recognising deterioration, following infection prevention procedures, supporting prescribed treatment and reporting significant changes promptly.

Pneumonia & Respiratory Infection Awareness Checklist

✓ Know the individual's usual breathing pattern, mobility and general wellbeing.

✓ Observe for a new or worsening cough.

✓ Recognise increasing breathlessness or changes in breathing.

✓ Observe for fever, shivering or significant changes in general wellbeing.

✓ Be alert to changes in sputum where relevant.

✓ Recognise that increased confusion, drowsiness or weakness may indicate deterioration.

✓ Monitor food and fluid intake where required by the care plan.

✓ Follow prescribed nutrition, hydration and swallowing arrangements.

✓ Follow the individual's dysphagia and **IDDSI requirements** where applicable.

✓ Follow good hand hygiene, PPE and infection prevention procedures.

✓ Support prescribed medication, inhalers or other treatment only when trained, competent and authorised.

✓ **Never independently alter prescribed oxygen, medication or respiratory treatment.**

✓ Record relevant observations accurately and objectively.

✓ Report significant changes from the individual's usual condition promptly.

✓ Be alert to signs of serious deterioration and possible **sepsis**.

✓ **Call 999 if a life-threatening medical emergency is suspected.**

Further Information

For further guidance on pneumonia and respiratory infections, visit:

NHS – Pneumonia
https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/pneumonia/

NHS – Respiratory Tract Infections
https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/respiratory-tract-infection/

NHS – Sepsis
https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/sepsis/

NICE – Pneumonia: Diagnosis and Management
https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/ng250

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Related Knowledge Hub Resources

- Resource 003 – Recognising the Signs of Dysphagia
- Resource 006 – Helping Someone Eat and Drink Safely
- Resource 023 – Hand Hygiene Best Practice Checklist
- Resource 024 – Safe Use of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)
- Resource 030 – Sepsis Awareness in Care Settings
- Resource 033 – Infection Prevention & Control
- Resource 034 – Recognising Deterioration in Care Settings
- Resource 062 – COPD Awareness in Care Settings

Related FlexiLearnHub Courses

- Infection Prevention & Control Awareness
- Dysphagia Awareness & IDDSI Framework Training
- Nutrition & Hydration Awareness

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