

MYCOPLASMA



What is mycoplasma?

Mycoplasma is an infection caused by the bacteria *Mycoplasma pneumoniae*. It usually presents as an upper respiratory tract infection. Most cases are mild but very rare cases can result in pneumonia. Mycoplasma can be difficult to diagnose as it mimics the symptoms of other bacterial and viral infections, such as the common cold. Mycoplasma infection can occur at any age but infections are highest among school-aged children and college students.

How do you contract mycoplasma?

Mycoplasma is a contagious respiratory infection. It is transmitted from person to person by infected respiratory droplets during close contact (coughing and sneezing or by direct contact with objects soiled by these). Transmission is thought to require prolonged close contact with an infected person.

Symptoms

Often symptoms are so mild that the infection is not recognised. In the early stages of the illness, Mycoplasma can appear similar to a cold or the flu. It may lead to a persistent cough and fatigue that can last for months.

- Typical symptoms include:
- Headaches
- Fever
- Sore throat
- Fatigue Lethargy
- Dry cough

The cough is incessant and is usually worse at night. It can range from a dry cough to mildly productive with some sputum discolouration.

Mycoplasma may lead to:

- Bronchitis
- Wheezing
- Pneumonia
- Ear infections
- Sinusitis

And in very rare cases even infections of the heart and brain.

Diagnosis

Mycoplasma can be difficult to diagnose, as it mimics the symptoms of other bacterial and viral infections, such as the common cold. The disease incubates (develops silently) for the first one to three weeks after exposure.

Diagnosis is often made by clinical symptoms of the patient and examination. There is a blood test available that tests for antibodies in the blood. It does not test for the bacteria itself. Interpretation of results can be difficult as it combines two types of antibodies, one that rises acutely with the illness IgM and IgG that remains positive for years and indicates prior exposure. Interpretation needs to be considered in conjunction with the patient's symptoms. To be certain of a correct diagnosis a repeat blood test can be performed after 2–3 weeks but this is not common.

Who is at risk for developing Mycoplasma pneumoniae?

In most healthy adults, the immune system can fight off Mycoplasma before it grows into a serious infection. Those who are most at risk includes:

- Older adults
- People with lung diseases
- Young children less than five years old
- People who have diseases that compromise their immune system

Treatment

Exclusion from childcare, school or work is not necessary. No vaccine is available at present. Effective antibiotic treatment is available, although most people recover completely without it. Antibiotics may speed recovery, but appear not to reduce the period for which a person is able to transmit infection. You can expect the cough and fatigue symptoms to linger on. Most cases will resolve after 2-4 weeks with no lasting consequences.

How can I prevent Mycoplasma?

Close places make it easy for the infection to transmit from person to person. Here are some tips to lower your risk of infection:

- Stay away from people who have symptoms of Mycoplasma
- Wash hands before eating and after interacting with infected people
- Make sure infected people cover their noses and mouth when they sneeze or cough with tissues and dispose of these appropriately
- Eat a balanced diet
- Get 6-8 hours of sleep per night

When in doubt, always consult your doctor for further advice.