Pneumocystis Carinii Pneumonia (PCP)

About PCP
Pneumocystis Carinii Pneumonia, also called PCP, is an infection in the lungs. PCP is caused by a germ named Pneumocystis carinii. This is a common germ found in the air.

PCP has been called an opportunistic infection (OI). OIs are illnesses caused by usually harmless germs that are often not a problem to people with healthy immune systems. They are a problem to people with weak immune systems.

People at Risk for PCP
Any person with a weak immune system or chronic condition are at risk for PCP. People infected with the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) are also at risk. HIV attacks helper T cells which help your body to fight off infection. As your T cell count (CD4 count) gets lower, the risk of getting all infections increase. PCP usually occurs when your helper T cell count is less than 200.

A normal T cell count for a healthy person is 700 to 1600. For people with HIV, a healthy count is greater than 500. OIs can occur with a T cell count of less than 200 and usually happen when the T cell count is less than 100. If your immune system is weak and your number of helper T cells are low, you may not be able to fight off PCP.

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Learn more about your health care.
Signs of PCP infection

Some first signs of PCP are fevers above 100.5 F for several days, fatigue and weight loss. Later, there is shortness of breath and cough. This is usually a dry cough with no mucus produced. PCP is serious. It is important to identify this lung infection early so treatment can begin. A doctor should be notified if your T cell count is under 200 and you have any of these signs and symptoms that do not go away.

Diagnosis and Treatment of PCP

A bronchoscopy will be done to help diagnose PCP. Your doctor uses a scope during this test to look down your airway and lungs. A chest x-ray, blood tests and breathing tests also will be done.

There are many different drugs available to treat PCP infection. Some of these drugs must be given into your blood vessels. Other drugs may be given into your blood vessels and by mouth. It is important to take the medicine even when you are feeling better.

Once you have had PCP you may get it again. Your doctor will order preventative medicines for you to take regularly. If taken regularly, these medicines should help keep PCP from coming back. You also may keep PCP from coming back by keeping your immune system healthy:

- Eat a healthy diet, exercise regularly, get enough rest and learn to manage stress in your life.
- Avoid drugs and alcohol.
- Take all medicines as they are prescribed by your doctor.
- Go to the clinic or doctor for regular check-ups. Report any new signs to your doctor.

Talk to your doctor or others on your health care team if you have questions. You may request more written information from the Library for Health Information at (614) 293-3707 or email: health-info@osu.edu.