Centre of Research Excellence in **Pulmonary Fibrosis**

Lung Foundation Australia

Living with pulmonary fibrosis

Preventing and managing respiratory infections

Contents

If you have a chronic lung condition such as pulmonary fibrosis, you are at higher risk of serious illness from a respiratory infection. That's why it's important you understand just what respiratory infections are, how they are spread and what you can do to look after yourself if you contract one.

Title: Preventing and managing respiratory infections
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Editor/s: Lung Foundation Australia and the Centre of Research Excellence in Pulmonary Fibrosis
Designer: Wayne Froneman, OYO Studio

Most-common respiratory infections in Australia

Respiratory infections in Australia are most commonly caused by viruses and bacteria.

Common viruses

Influenza A and B
Respiratory Syncytial Virus (RSV)
COVID-19
Rhinovirus (common cold)

Common bacteria

Streptococcus pneumoniae
Mycoplasma pneumoniae
Haemophilus influenzae
Legionella pneumoniae

What is the difference between viruses and bacteria?

Viral and bacterial infections often cause similar symptoms, although viral illnesses are more likely to cause a runny nose, sore throat and muscle aches and pains. They are spread in similar ways, but are different germs:

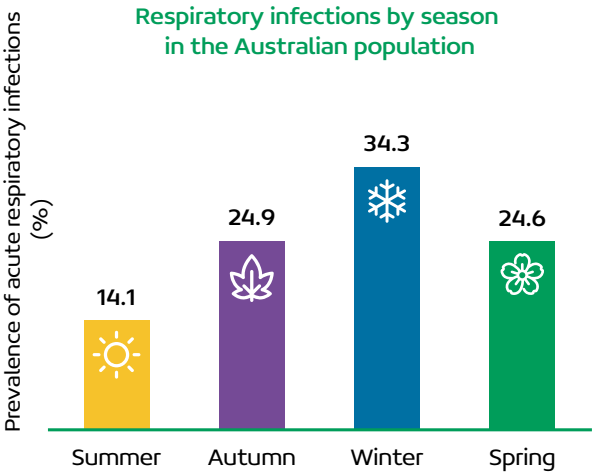
- **Bacteria** are single cells that are found almost everywhere on Earth. The human body is full of bacteria and most bacteria in the body are harmless. A relatively small number of types of bacteria can cause disease.
- **Viruses** are smaller and need a host such as a human or animal to multiply. They cause an infection by entering and multiplying inside the body's cells. Some viruses cause illness by damaging these cells.

Treatment will differ according to the type of infection. Antibiotics are used to treat bacterial infections – they are not effective for viral infections.

- Sometimes, you can have both a bacterial infection and a viral infection at the same time, which may require antibiotics to help.
- While most viruses are cleared by the body's immune system, anti-viral medications can be used to help treat some viruses, such as COVID-19 or influenza.

When are respiratory infections most common?

Respiratory infections can occur at any time of the year but are most common in the winter months.



What does this mean for you?

If you have a chronic lung condition such as pulmonary fibrosis, you are more likely to be affected by respiratory infections. Although many respiratory infections are mild, people with pulmonary fibrosis are at higher risk of a serious infection.

- This is particularly the case if you are over 65 years old, have other chronic medical conditions (such as diabetes) or are of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander background.

Some treatments for pulmonary fibrosis can weaken your immune system, making you more likely to catch a respiratory infection.

Recognising the symptoms of a respiratory infection

Most symptoms will resolve at home while you rest

Nasal congestion

Sneezing

Sore throat

Cough

- This may be different from your normal cough by being wet with mucous

But symptoms may sometimes progress

Fever (temperature >38°C)

Shortness of breath

Severe cough or wheeze

If your symptoms progress, you should visit your GP for a review. In some cases, you may need to be admitted to hospital for antibiotics, antiviral medications, oxygen and other treatments.

What does it mean for your lung condition?

If you contract a respiratory infection, the symptoms of your chronic lung condition may suddenly become worse, which is also known as a flare-up or exacerbation. People experiencing an acute exacerbation usually report worsening breathlessness and increased cough. You are encouraged to discuss what to expect during an acute exacerbation with your treating healthcare team.

How respiratory infections spread

Respiratory infections spread from one person to the next either through direct contact or droplets or aerosols in the air.

Direct contact

Kissing

Hugging

Shaking hands (and then touching your mouth)

Droplet or aerosol

Coughing

Sneezing

Talking, shouting or singing

Crowded rooms with poor ventilation

Preventing respiratory infections

Prevention is key! Especially for people with pulmonary fibrosis, it is very important to do everything you can to avoid catching any infections.

- **Keep your hands clean**
  Wash your hands frequently with soap and water for at least 20 seconds or use a 60% alcohol-based hand sanitiser. Make sure you dry your hands properly
  - This is particularly important before meals, after using the bathroom and in crowded spaces such as the waiting room at the doctor's clinic or shopping centres
- **Clean frequently touched surfaces**
  Make sure you clean surfaces and objects that are touched often, such as door handles, light switches, toilets, countertops and electronics
- **Consider social distancing**
  Try and stay more than 1.5 metres away from other people to reduce the spread of germs
- **Don't touch your face**
  As much as possible, avoid touching your eyes, nose and mouth
- **Avoid friends and family who are ill**
  Although it may be difficult, try and avoid seeing anyone who you know has an infection
- **Get vaccinated**
  Vaccinations are safe and effective. Talk to your GP about which ones are suitable for you.

Some people with reduced immunity may be required to take 'preventative' antibiotics such as Bactrim several times per week. This protects against certain types of respiratory infection.

Which vaccinations and when?

People with pulmonary fibrosis may be at higher risk of serious illness from respiratory infections. That's why it is so important that you stay up to date with all your vaccinations. Here's a list of some vaccinations you should talk to your GP about:

COVID-19: Protects against severe COVID-19 illness

Everyone aged 18 and older as well as children with certain medical conditions should have at least one primary COVID-19 vaccination. Once you have had the first one, you should then consider subsequent booster doses every 6 to 12 months.

Influenza: Protects against the seasonal flu

Annual influenza vaccination is recommended for everyone who is older than 6 months of age, particularly people with medical conditions that increase their risk of severe influenza, such as a chronic lung condition like pulmonary fibrosis.

Streptococcus pneumoniae: Protects against pneumococcal disease, which is the most-common type of bacterial pneumonia

The recommended number and timing of pneumococcal vaccinations varies depending on your age and medical history. For people at increased risk, including those with chronic lung conditions like pulmonary fibrosis, you should receive three vaccinations over a period of 5–6 years to receive the full course. Only some people are eligible for government funding for this vaccine, so your treating healthcare team will talk to you about any out-of-pocket costs.

RSV: Protects against severe RSV illness in adults 60 years and older

The RSV vaccine is recommended for adults aged 60-74 years who have medical conditions that increase their risk of severe disease, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples aged 60-74, and all adults over 75 years old. It is currently only available on private prescription in Australia, however, if your doctor recommends it for you, it is a single vaccination that can be given at any time of the year.

Herpes zoster: Protects against shingles

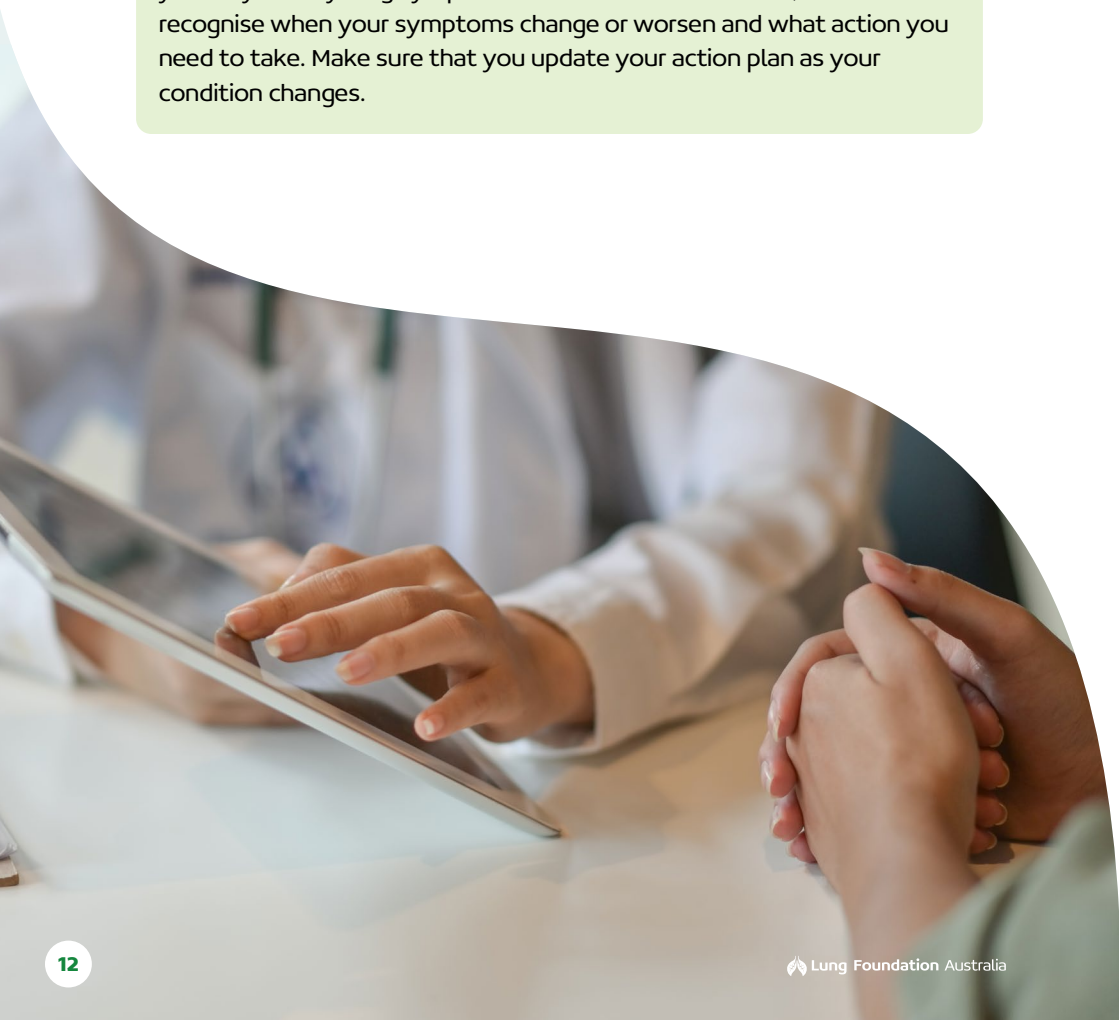
The herpes zoster vaccine is recommended for people aged 50+ years or any adult who is immunocompromised. It involves two doses given a couple of months apart. Only some people are eligible for government funding for this vaccine, so your treating healthcare team will talk to you about any out-of-pocket costs.

Be prepared with an action plan

Being prepared helps to manage any respiratory infection that you may catch. The best way to be prepared is to put an action plan together with your treating healthcare team.

What is an action plan?

An action plan is a simple step-by-step guide to help you understand your day-to-day lung symptoms and current medications, how to recognise when your symptoms change or worsen and what action you need to take. Make sure that you update your action plan as your condition changes.



You should work together with your healthcare team to put a plan in place, but it may include some of these steps:

Symptoms of a respiratory infection	Feeling unwell, runny nose, sneezing or a cough that is different to normal
Test for COVID-19 and influenza	Rapid antigen testing at home (COVID-19 only) or PCR testing in a pathology laboratory
Visit your doctor early	Get as much rest as possible, maintain a healthy diet and stay hydrated at home. Book an appointment to see your local doctor so your progress can be monitored
If appropriate, take early antibiotics, antivirals or other medications (such as steroids) as discussed with your treating healthcare team	Ensure you have all the necessary prescriptions from your doctor and an adequate supply of in-date medication
Reduce the spread	Practice good hygiene and try and avoid contact with other people as much as possible
Monitor for worsening symptoms	If your symptoms worsen or you find you have worsening shortness of breath, seek medical attention

Recovering from a respiratory infection

You may find that it takes a while to feel like yourself again after an infection. Depending on how severe the infection was, it may take you weeks or even months, but there are some things you can do to make the recovery as easy as possible:

Take the full course of any medication your doctor has prescribed as well as your normal medications

Make sure you eat a well-balanced diet and stay hydrated every day

Rest when you need to – Taking a nap during the day may help you regain your energy

Slowly and steadily start exercising again – Try and do a little more exercise each day

- Your treating healthcare team may recommend a course of pulmonary rehabilitation to aid with your recovery and to help improve your fitness

Follow-up with your treating healthcare team while you are recovering to see how you are progressing and if there are any additional vaccinations you may need.

If you take any medications that suppress your immune system or have other coexisting conditions (such as heart failure), you are more likely to have a more-severe, complicated or extended infection. This means you need to do everything you can to look after yourself during your recovery.

Getting support after a respiratory infection

Your treating healthcare team

If you find you need more information or some extra support to get you through a respiratory infection, speak with your treating healthcare team. They can give you the most up-to-date advice.

Lung Foundation Australia

You can also check the Lung Foundation Australia website. There are a range of resources that may help to answer your questions as well as an information and support line and support groups.

Visit **lungfoundation.com.au** or free call **1800 654 301**.

LUNG FOUNDATION AUSTRALIA SERVICES

- Information and Support Team
- Lung disease information resources
- Education webinars
- Support groups
- Peer-to-peer connections
- Referral to pulmonary rehabilitation and Lungs in Action exercise programs
- E-newsletter

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Produced in collaboration with:

Centre of Research Excellence in **Pulmonary Fibrosis**

Freecall 1800 654 301
enquiries@lungfoundation.com.au
lungfoundation.com.au
PO Box 1949 Milton, QLD 4064

Lung Foundation Australia