

FAQ: *Mycoplasma pneumoniae*

1. What is *Mycoplasma pneumoniae*?

Mycoplasma pneumoniae is a bacterium that can cause respiratory illness, ranging from upper respiratory tract illness infections to pneumonia. The pneumonia caused by *M. pneumoniae* is considered an atypical bacterial pneumonia due to the differences in symptoms and treatment compared to other causes of pneumonia.

Healthy people, particularly children, may also be asymptomatic carriers of *M. pneumoniae*.

2. Who can get *Mycoplasma pneumoniae*?

Mycoplasma pneumoniae infections are typically seen in school-going children older than five years and young adults; however, anyone may become infected. People with pre-existing conditions affecting the lungs, as well as those with immunocompromising conditions, are most at risk for serious illness following *M. pneumoniae* infection. Up to 10% of people infected with *M. pneumoniae* develop pneumonia.

Outbreaks of *M. pneumoniae* usually occur in crowded settings, such as schools, universities, long-term care facilities, and hospitals.

3. How is *Mycoplasma pneumoniae* transmitted?

Mycoplasma pneumoniae can be transmitted from person to person via respiratory droplets when an infected person coughs or sneezes. The incubation period can range from 1 to 3 weeks before an infected person develops symptoms. Household contacts of someone infected with *M. pneumoniae* are often most at risk for infection.

4. What are the signs and symptoms of *Mycoplasma pneumoniae*?

The symptoms of *M. pneumoniae* infection can range from mild upper respiratory to lower respiratory tract symptoms and, rarely, severe systemic symptoms.

The onset of symptoms is usually gradual and includes low-grade fever, tiredness, headache, runny nose, sore throat, and ear pain. The most prominent symptom of atypical pneumonia caused by *M. pneumoniae* is a persistent dry cough, sometimes associated with chest pain and wheezing. Most cases of pneumonia are mild, and people usually recover on their own without intervention. However, a small percentage of people may develop severe disease. Indicators of severe diseases include rash, haemolysis (destruction of red blood cells), joint pain, gastrointestinal symptoms, kidney dysfunction, and cardiac involvement.

5. How is *Mycoplasma pneumoniae* diagnosed?

Mycoplasma pneumoniae infection is often underdiagnosed due to the mild presentation and non-specific symptoms. The chest X-rays of people with atypical pneumonia often do not show infiltrates, which would usually be seen with other causes of pneumonia.

Laboratory diagnosis is usually done through polymerase chain reaction (PCR) after a nasal or throat swab is submitted for testing. *M. pneumoniae* is part of the routine respiratory screen for diagnostic queries at the Centre for Respiratory Diseases and Meningitis.

6. How is *Mycoplasma pneumoniae* treated?

Appropriate antibiotics are generally prescribed for cases of pneumonia caused by *M. pneumoniae*. People with mild illness and upper respiratory tract infections usually recover on their own without antibiotics. Over-the-counter medications may be prescribed to relieve mild symptoms.

7. How is *Mycoplasma pneumoniae* prevented?

The best way to prevent infection with *M. pneumoniae* is through good hygiene practices, including hand-washing. Droplet precautions should be put in place for patients who are hospitalised with *M. pneumoniae*. There is no vaccine for *M. pneumoniae* infections.

There are currently no available vaccines to protect against infection with *M. pneumoniae*. Previous infection with the bacteria does not protect you from recurrent infection in the long term.

8. Where can I find out more information?

- For medical/clinical-related queries, contact the NICD Hotline at 0800 212 552 (for use by healthcare professionals only).
- Laboratory-related queries to the Centre for Respiratory Diseases and Meningitis: Linda de Gouveia 011-555-0327 (lindad@nicd.ac.za); Nicole Wolter 011-555-0352 (nicolew@nicd.ac.za) or Mignon du Plessis 011-555-0387 (mignond@nicd.ac.za)