



plain and simple facts

HEALTH CONCERNS



PCP

What is PCP?

- PCP is the short form for *Pneumocystis pneumonia*. It is a lung infection that can be life threatening. It is one of the most common and most serious infections associated with AIDS.
- HIV positive people with CD4+ counts below 250 are at risk of developing this type of pneumonia.

How does one get PCP?

- PCP is caused by the germ *Pneumocystis jiroveci*. This germ is very common and most people have been exposed to it. However, it can only cause disease in people with a weakened immune system, such as people who have had transplants, chemotherapy for cancer or advanced HIV infection.

What are the signs and symptoms of PCP?

- Symptoms of PCP include fever, dry cough, tiredness and increasing shortness of breath.
- The cough in PCP is usually dry, especially in non-smokers. However, in smokers there may be sputum (phlegm) that comes with the cough.
- The symptoms may appear mild at first and gradually get worse over several weeks.
- If PCP is detected early, it can usually be treated. However, if left untreated, PCP can be life threatening. If you have these symptoms, you should see your doctor right away.

How can I prevent PCP?

- If your immune system is healthy (CD4+ count over 500), you would not get sick from PCP. PCP is not a contagious disease that you can get from being around people carrying the germ.
- If your CD4+ count is between 250 and 500, your risk of getting PCP would not be significantly increased compared to a person with a CD4+ count over 500.
- If your CD4+ count is below 250 or if you had PCP before, your risk of getting sick from PCP is greatly increased. You should therefore take one of the medications that can prevent PCP.
- Medications that are used to prevent PCP include:
 - ~ trimethoprim-sulfamethoxazole (TMP/SMX or Septra or Bactrim) by mouth
 - ~ dapsone (Avlosulfon) by mouth, either alone or in combination with another drug called pyrimethamine
 - ~ pentamidine by inhalation or by intravenous infusion periodically

- These treatments will prevent most PCP from occurring, but they are not 100% safe. In some people who take medication to prevent PCP, they may still get sick from it.

How can PCP be treated?

- There are different treatments that can be used for PCP. The choice of treatments depends in a person's general health, drug allergies and the seriousness of his or her symptoms. People who are less sick can be treated at home on oral medications; those with very serious symptoms usually require hospitalization and treatment by intravenous medications.
- Usually the treatment for PCP needs to be taken for three weeks. It may take a whole week of treatment before a person with PCP starts to feel better. After that, the person should stay on medications to prevent PCP for life.
- Medications that are used to treat PCP include:
 - ~ trimethoprim-sulfamethoxazole (TMP/SMX, Septra or Bactrim) by mouth or by IV (given through a vein)
 - ~ pentamidine by IV
 - ~ dapsone (Avlosulfon) and trimethoprim (Proloprim) by mouth
 - ~ clindamycin and primaquine by mouth
 - ~ atovaquone (Mepron) by mouthPrednisone may also be used in combination with the above medications in severe cases of PCP.

Decisions about particular medical treatments should always be made in consultation with a qualified medical practitioner knowledgeable about HIV-related illness and the treatments in question.



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