

New York State Department of Health

Mycoplasma Infection (walking pneumonia, atypical pneumonia)

Last Reviewed: November 2006

What is mycoplasma infection?

Mycoplasma infection is respiratory illness caused by *Mycoplasma pneumoniae*, a microscopic organism related to bacteria.

Who gets mycoplasma infection?

Anyone can get the disease, but it most often affects older children and young adults.

When do mycoplasma infections occur?

Mycoplasma infections occur sporadically throughout the year. Widespread community outbreaks may occur at intervals of four to eight years. Mycoplasma infection is most common in late summer and fall.

How is mycoplasma spread?

Mycoplasma is spread through contact with droplets from the nose and throat of infected people especially when they cough and sneeze. Transmission is thought to require prolonged close contact with an infected person. Spread in families, schools and institutions occurs slowly. The contagious period is probably fewer than 10 days and occasionally longer.

What are the symptoms of mycoplasma infection?

Typical symptoms include fever, cough, bronchitis, sore throat, headache and tiredness. A common result of mycoplasma infection is pneumonia (sometimes called "walking pneumonia" because it is usually mild and rarely requires hospitalization). Infections of the middle ear (otitis media) also can result. Symptoms may persist for a few days to more than a month.

How soon after exposure do symptoms appear?

Symptoms generally begin 15 to 25 days after exposure. The symptoms generally develop slowly, over a period of two to four days.

How is mycoplasma infection diagnosed?

Mycoplasma infection is usually diagnosed on the basis of typical symptoms. A nonspecific blood test (cold agglutinins) is helpful in definitive diagnosis, but is not always positive. The use of more specific laboratory tests is often limited to special outbreak investigations.

Does past infection with mycoplasma make a person immune?

Immunity after mycoplasma infection does occur, but is not lifelong. Second infections are known to occur, although they may be milder. The duration of immunity is unknown.

What is the treatment for mycoplasma infection?

Antibiotics such as erythromycin, clarithromycin or azithromycin are effective treatment. However, because mycoplasma infection usually resolves on its own, antibiotic treatment of mild symptoms is not always necessary.

What can be done to prevent the spread of mycoplasma?

At this time, there are no vaccines for the prevention of mycoplasma infection and there are no reliably effective measures for control. As with any respiratory disease, all people should cover their face when coughing or sneezing.

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