



# Health and Welfare Alert

## Preventing Pneumonia and the Flu #31-03-25

As a direct support professional (DSP), your observations play a crucial role in the early identification and treatment of illnesses like pneumonia and the flu. Your ability to recognize even subtle changes in a person's condition can make all the difference in ensuring timely medical intervention.

It's important to know that Ohioans with developmental disabilities (DD) may be at higher risk for pneumonia and flu due to chronic lung conditions like asthma, emphysema, and chronic bronchitis. Swallowing difficulties, gastroesophageal reflux disease, seizure disorder, tube feeding, cerebral palsy, and being suppressed can all increase the risk of aspiration.

Pneumonia is a serious infection that can affect the air sacs (called alveoli) in the lungs. People with DD may be at higher risk of pneumonia due to factors such as impaired immune systems, difficulty swallowing, mobility issues, or challenges with communication. Click the image for a video with more information:



Here are 4 key strategies that may help prevent pneumonia in people with developmental disabilities:

### 1. Vaccinations

- **Pneumococcal Vaccine:** The pneumococcal vaccine (PPSV23 or PCV13) is a critical preventative measure. People with DD,

especially those with conditions such as Down syndrome, cerebral palsy, or other genetic or neurological disorders, may have a weakened immune system, making them more vulnerable to pneumonia caused by *Streptococcus pneumoniae*.

- **Flu and COVID-19 Vaccines:** Influenza can lead to secondary bacterial pneumonia, so getting an annual flu shot can reduce the risk of developing pneumonia following a viral infection.
- The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommend that people get their flu shots before the end of October. However, getting a late flu shot can be better than not getting one at all.
- Pneumonia can also be a complication of COVID-19, so vaccination is important for people with DD.

### 2. Early Detection of Respiratory Infections

- **Communication:** People with DD might not always be able to communicate their symptoms effectively, so caregivers should monitor for early signs of respiratory illness.
- **Watch for warning signs:** Early signs or symptoms may include coughing, wheezing, fever, choking, difficulty breathing or a change in behavior.
- **Act early:** If there is a concern, seek care immediately. Early diagnosis and treatment can significantly improve outcomes.

### 3. Manage Chronic Conditions

- **Asthma and Allergies:** If the person has asthma or allergies, these conditions should be well managed to prevent exacerbations that could lead to respiratory infections.
- **Gastroesophageal Reflux Disease (GERD):** GERD can increase the risk of aspiration pneumonia, so managing this condition with appropriate medical interventions (such as medications or lifestyle changes) can reduce risk.



- Ask the physician if there are other conditions or concerns that may increase risk.

#### 4. Addressing Swallowing Difficulties (Dysphagia)

- **Speech Therapy:** People with DD who have difficulty swallowing may be at increased risk for aspiration pneumonia. Speech therapists can assess and provide strategies to improve swallowing safety, such as modifying food textures or teaching swallowing techniques.
- **Positioning During Meals:** Ensuring proper seating and posture during eating can reduce the risk of aspiration, which can lead to pneumonia. A trained occupational therapist or speech therapist can help.
- **Know your diet textures!** If a person is on a specific diet, ensure they have the proper diet/texture to reduce the risk of choking.

#### Fast Facts

- Close to 854 people with developmental disabilities were hospitalized due to pneumonia in 2024.
- in 2023, 48 people died of pneumonia and 4 more from the flu. In 2024, 37 died of pneumonia and 6 more due to the flu.
- Aspiration pneumonia is one of the top causes of death in people with DD, and it can often be prevented.

#### Prevention Tips to Protect You and Others

- Stay home when sick
- Cover coughs and sneezes
- Wash hands often
- Avoid touching eyes, nose, or mouth
- Get enough sleep
- Exercise and avoid stress
- Drink plenty of fluids
- Avoid close contact with sick people

Your vigilance and quick action are invaluable for the health and well-being of the people you support. Thank you for your dedication!

## KNOW THE SIGNS & SYMPTOMS



### PNEUMONIA

- Sweating
- Fever
- Shortness of breath
- Wheezing
- Fatigue
- Cough especially involving sputum (mucus)
- Difficulty swallowing
- Chest pain

### ASPIRATION PNEUMONIA

- Regular coughing or sneezing while eating
- Gurgling sounds after eating
- Sudden coughing, wheezing, or hoarseness
- Drooling
- Changes in breathing patterns
- Excessive throat clearing
- Avoids eating, especially favorite foods because they are uncomfortable

### FLU

- Fever above 100 degrees
- Sore throat
- Fatigue and weakness that can last up to two to three weeks
- Cough
- General aches and pains
- Intense headache
- Runny or stuffy nose

### TAKE ACTION

- Use your training, equipment, and skills to take someone's vitals
  - A pulse oximeter can measure a person's oxygen
- Call a nurse, doctor, or get assistance immediately if a person is experiencing signs of pneumonia