

**Three Minute Article for Parents**

## **Community-acquired childhood pneumonia: A serious disease which needs close attention of parents**

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Childhood pneumonia continues to be a disease that causes death among children, mainly in South-East Asia and Africa. It has caused one million deaths in children worldwide in 2013 and has accounted for one fifth of the mortality in children (WHO data). UNICEF (2019) estimates the under-five-year death rate in Sri Lanka due to acute respiratory tract infections to be 7.1 per 1000 live births.

The organisms known to cause pneumonia in children include many viruses and bacteria. Bacterial pneumonia cannot reliably be differentiated from viral pneumonia. Pneumonia should be considered in children when there is persistent or repetitive fever  $>38.5^{\circ}\text{C}$  together with chest indrawing and a raised breathing rate. Majority of the cases of pneumonia are “community acquired pneumonia”, compared to “hospital acquired pneumonia”. Pneumonia needs early diagnosis and aggressive management to prevent deaths and severe complications. Antibiotics constitute a significant part of its management.

As the disease pattern of pneumonia in Sri Lankan children is not well described, we undertook a study to fill this knowledge gap. 127 children admitted to a Teaching Hospital with community acquired pneumonia were evaluated; the commonest age group affected was 1-5 years (69 patients); 42 were in the age group of 1 month to 1 year and 15 were above 5 years. This shows that children below 5 years are at a higher risk of developing pneumonia.

None of the studied patients died but most of them needed very close observation and management. Majority of the patients (61%) needed admission for more than 5 days. 51/ 127 needed care in the high

dependency unit with supplemental oxygen and 3 needed to be admitted to the intensive care unit.

An alarming feature was that about two thirds of the patients needed a second line intravenous antibiotic suggestive of resistance to the usual antibiotics used to treat pneumonia. These medicines are more expensive and associated with more side effects. Wide-spread antibiotic use is considered a major cause for antibiotic resistance. It is generally considered that countries like Sri Lanka where proper antibiotic policies are not in place, antibiotics are over prescribed by doctors, partly due to pressure from patients and parents. Sometimes, antibiotics are issued by private pharmacies without a doctor's prescription; an undesirable practice.

In conclusion, the take-home message to parents is that childhood pneumonia is a serious illness which needs very close attention. High fever with cough and fast breathing of a child needs the attention of a doctor. Unnecessary over-use of antibiotics may be a cause for the need for second line antibiotics.

### **References**

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