

hand hygiene

A Quiet Invader

BY HEATHER STOLTZFUS, MPH, RN, CIC

I'm the tickle in your throat that won't go away—the pesky little infiltrator ruining your day. I'm not as well-known as COVID-19; influenza causes more of a scene. However, I keep children up at night, as my bacterial pneumonia can cause quite a fright. I'm subtle and sneaky, a real quiet invader. But be aware that I can cause your breath to labor.

I'm a free spirit! Unlike my bacterial brethren, I don't bother with bulky cell walls. That's right, I'm a wall-less wonder! This can make me rather slippery and hard to target with your usual antibiotics, such as penicillin. Good luck trying to box me in—I've evolved to live life on the edge, undetected by your immune defenses until I've already settled into your respiratory tract. I'm one of the smallest pathogens capable of independent reproduction, favoring your respiratory tract. I hold the titles for the most common cause of pneumonia in children and the second most common cause in adults.

I'm no newcomer to the microbial world, however. First documented as atypical pneumonia by Hobart Reimann, MD, in the 1930s, I'm easily set apart from pneumococcal infections due to my resistance to certain antibiotics. Isolated in the 1940s, I've been confusing doctors and dodging treatments for decades. I've earned quite a reputation for being a tricky customer of the respiratory world. Lately, I've made a bit of a comeback, prompting a notice from the CDC in October about increases in my sightings across the US in 2024. According to the CDC, health care providers should strongly suspect

me of being the cause of pneumonia and test when indicated to promote good antibiotic stewardship.

I cause infections ranging from mild sore throats and bronchitis to full-blown pneumonia. My infection tends to peak in the fall, but I'm active year-round, spreading like wildfire in crowded settings such as schools, dormitories, and military barracks. Upon initially noticing my infection, you might think you've just caught a weak respiratory virus. But my true talent lies in keeping you guessing. My complete list of symptoms may include the following:

- A persistent, slowly worsening, dry cough (my calling card).
- Low-grade fever.
- Fatigue that makes you feel like you're running on empty.
- Sore throat and mild chest discomfort.
- Headache.

For most healthy adults, I'm more of a nuisance than a threat. Since my infection often causes a milder version of pneumonia in healthy individuals, some have come to refer to my infection as walking pneumonia because mildly ill individuals may not be prompted to stay home to rest. Occasionally, however, I can cause serious complications such as severe pneumonia or neurological issues. Although my infection can hit at any age, it's more common to see me plaguing your younger population between the ages of 5 and 17 years, sometimes presenting with

To discover who I am, visit [InfectionControlToday.com/view/Jan-2025-bug-month](https://www.infectioncontroltoday.com/view/Jan-2025-bug-month)

differing symptoms such as diarrhea, wheezing, or vomiting.

I thrive on human contact—coughing, sneezing, or even talking too close to an infected person can help me spread. Once I'm in, it takes me 1 to 4 weeks to show my hand. By then, I'm already spreading to your friends, family, and coworkers. Sneaky, huh? Health care workers should use droplet precautions in addition to standard precautions for the duration of illness when caring for patients suspected or confirmed with my infection.

Stopping Me Isn't Easy, but It's Not Impossible

- Hygiene is key: Wash your hands frequently and cover your mouth when coughing or sneezing. I'm nothing if not opportunistic.
- Avoid close contact: If someone's coughing in your vicinity, you might want to keep your distance.
- Stay home when sick: It's rather rude to continue sharing me with other unsuspecting humans.

There's no vaccine against me, so your best defense is staying vigilant and informed. I might not cause the loudest outbreaks or be as well-known as some of my viral respiratory friends, but I'm always lurking, waiting for my next opportunity to strike.

I am Mycoplasma pneumoniae! □

