

## Experts: Young adults with underlying conditions risk pneumonia

KUALA LUMPUR, July 18 – Young adults with underlying health conditions, as well as those aged 65 and over, are at increased risk of contracting pneumococcal pneumonia<sup>1,2</sup> a disease that can be prevented by pneumococcal vaccination, experts said.<sup>3</sup>

Globally, pneumonia affects around 450 million people a year. Older people are more likely to suffer from pneumonia than normal adults.<sup>4</sup>

According to the **Department of Statistics Malaysia (DOSM)**, pneumonia was the second leading cause of death in Malaysia after ischemic heart disease in 2020.<sup>5</sup>

“People with other illnesses like heart disease, diabetes, and respiratory disease are at risk of getting pneumococcal pneumonia,”<sup>6</sup> said Dr. Hazlee Abdul Hadi, occupational health specialist and medical adviser at the Berkat group of companies.

“In addition to them, people with immunodeficiency and malignancy are also at high risk of contracting pneumococcal disease.”<sup>6</sup>

Certain conditions or treatments can affect an individual’s immune system, making them more vulnerable to a range of communicable diseases.<sup>seven</sup>

Human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) patients, cancer and transplant patients, patients undergoing immunosuppressive therapy, and hepatitis B and C patients are among those who lack adequate immunity.<sup>seven</sup>

“This condition makes them vulnerable to pneumococcal pneumonia,”<sup>seven</sup> Dr. Hazlee said Code blue.

Dr. Petrick Periasamy, consultant physician specializing in infectious diseases and head of the infectious diseases unit at Universiti Kebangsaan Hospital Malaysia (HUKM), pointed out that people aged 65 and over, as well as people suffering from comorbidities are at increased risk of developing pneumococcal disease.<sup>6,8</sup>

“As people age, their immune system naturally weakens.”<sup>8</sup>

“There are chances that older people will end up with serious health effects, including multiple organ failure, if they get pneumonia.”<sup>4</sup>

According to the Department of Statistics Malaysia (DOSM), the nation will reach aging status by 2030, with around 15% of Malaysians aged over 60.<sup>9</sup>

A 2014 study found that multiple underlying medical conditions increased the risk of pneumococcal pneumonia in adults in the United States from 2007 to 2010.<sup>2</sup>

The risk of pneumococcal disease increases with increasing number of risk factors.<sup>2</sup>

According to another study published in the Journal of Infectious Diseases in 2005, the incidence of pneumococcal pneumonia in the United States from 1999 to 2000 increased in adults ages 50 and

older with chronic conditions such as diabetes, chronic heart disease, and chronic lung disease, compared healthy adults of the same age group.<sup>ten</sup>

“In fact, adult smokers are at risk for community-acquired pneumonia (CAP), including passive smokers,”<sup>11</sup> added Dr. Petrick.

So Dr. Petrick suggested that older people take the pneumococcal vaccine, especially those over 65, even if they are healthy because age is a risk factor for pneumococcal pneumonia.<sup>8</sup>

We have two types of vaccination against pneumococcal pneumonia: the pneumococcal conjugate vaccine and the pneumococcal polysaccharide vaccine (PPSV23).<sup>12</sup>

An online survey conducted by the Malaysian Thoracic Society revealed that 62% of respondents do not know that pneumococcal disease can be prevented by vaccination.<sup>13</sup>

A nationwide study in Singapore showed the incidence of pneumococcal pneumonia to be around 4.5 per 100,000 population among people aged 15 to 64, while Thailand reported 177 to 580 cases of pneumonia for 100,000 inhabitants.<sup>14</sup>

At the same time, Dr. Petrick noted that the conventional method of using blood and sputum culture rarely isolates the causative organism.<sup>15</sup> *Streptococcus pneumoniae* is the leading cause of community-acquired pneumonia worldwide, including in the United States.<sup>16.17</sup>

“Blood and sputum cultures have a low detection rate compared to PCR tests and may be a reason for the low detection rates of pneumonia.”<sup>18</sup>

“The burden of pneumococcal pneumonia may be underestimated”,<sup>19</sup> said Dr. Petrick.

Nevertheless, in Malaysia, the reported incidence of pneumococcal pneumonia is low, which could be attributed to the lack of appropriate diagnostic tools.<sup>20</sup>

“This may be the reason why reported cases of pneumococcal pneumonia are low in the country.”<sup>20</sup>

Dr. Petrick stressed that the country should adapt to new technologies to improve the detection rate of pneumonia, a disease that can be effectively prevented with vaccines.<sup>3</sup>

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