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Home Illnesses and conditions Lungs and airways Pleurisy Pleurisy is inflammation of the sheet-like layers that cover the lungs (the pleura). The most common symptom of pleurisy is a sharp chest pain when breathing deeply. Sometimes the pain is also felt in the shoulder. The pain may be worse when you cough, sneeze or move around, and it may be relieved by taking shallow breaths. Other symptoms can include shortness of breath and a dry cough. Visit your GP if you experience the above symptoms. Seek immediate medical help if your chest pain is severe, particularly if you also have other symptoms, such as coughing up blood, nausea or sweating. Pleurisy can usually be diagnosed by studying your symptoms. Your GP can listen to your chest to check for the distinctive dry, crunching sound that suggests you may have pleurisy. Further tests may be needed to identify the underlying cause of your pleurisy and to assess how severe it is. These can include: Most cases are the result of a viral infection (such as the flu) or a bacterial infection (such as pneumonia). In rarer cases, pleurisy can be caused by conditions such as a blood clot blocking the flow of blood into the lungs (pulmonary embolism) or lung cancer. Pleurisy can affect people of all ages, but people of 65 years and over are most at risk, because they’re more likely to develop a chest infection. Read more about the causes of pleurisy. Treatment for pleurisy depends on the underlying cause. For example, pleurisy caused by a viral infection will often resolve itself without treatment. However, pleurisy caused by a bacterial infection is usually treated with antibiotics, and people who are frail or already in poor health may be admitted to hospital. Non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs), such as ibuprofen, are often used to relieve the chest pain associated with pleurisy. If excess fluid builds up between the pleural layers, it may be necessary to drain the fluid to prevent breathing difficulties. Read more about treating pleurisy. Pleurisy is inflammation of the pleura. It’s usually caused by another condition, such as an infection, but sometimes no cause can be identified. The pleura are two thin sheets of tissue that separate the lungs and ribcage. One is attached to the ribcage and the other is attached to the lungs. Between the pleural sheets is a thin layer of liquid that lubricates the pleura, helping to reduce friction when you breathe in and out. When there’s inflammation, the surfaces of the two layers can become rough and the fluid can become sticky. This can cause the layers to rub together, resulting in pain and discomfort. An infection is the most common cause of pleurisy. Any type of infection has the potential to spread to the pleura, but viral infections are usually responsible. Viruses known to cause pleurisy include: In some cases, pleurisy is caused by bacteria, such as: