



Cough and fever? It may be

Symptoms of mycoplasma infection can be mistaken for flu. In serious cases, people can get pneumonia. **JUNE CHEONG** reports

After a bacterial infection last May, Ms Madeline Wong developed a hacking cough and fever for five months. The 37-year-old corporate communications manager also experienced shortness of breath and prolonged fatigue.

Ms Wong, who had to go through seven courses of antibiotics in all, said: "It was a tiredness I had never felt before. I couldn't get out of bed at times and I had never slept so much in my entire life."

"I'm usually an active person but I had to lay off going to the gym." The bacteria that attacked Ms Wong's

body was a group of bacteria called mycoplasma.

There are more than 120 species of the bacteria, of which three can cause diseases in humans. Common infections due to mycoplasma

Symptoms of mycoplasma infection last between **1 and 4** weeks on average

are upper respiratory infection and pneumonia.

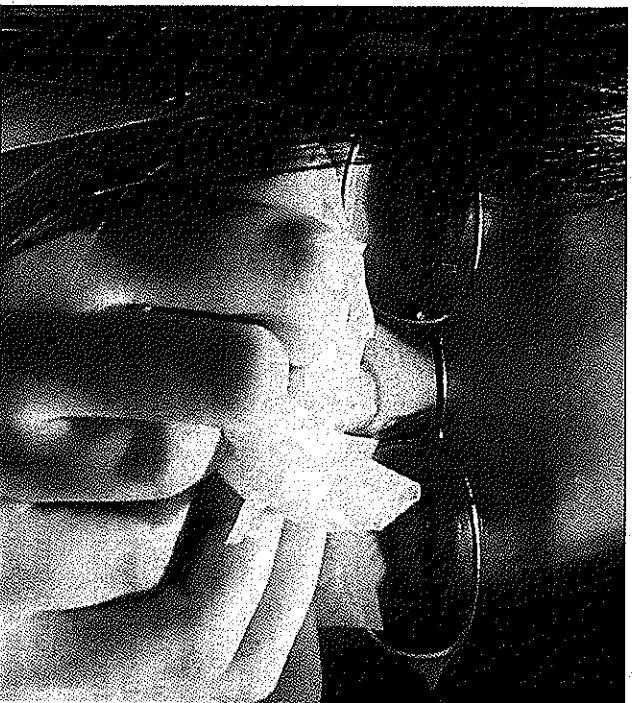
Dr Anita Menon, a consultant from the infectious disease service at the department of paediatric medicine at KK Women's and Children's Hospital, said that school-going children and young adults are most susceptible.

Symptoms of mycoplasma infection are non-specific and include headaches, malaise, fever, a scratchy sore throat and coughs, which can be mistaken for influenza.

In more serious cases, patients with mycoplasma-induced pneumonia may experience chills, chest pain, nausea, vomiting and diarrhoea.

Dr Ong Thun How, a consultant at the department of respiratory and critical care medicine at Singapore General Hospital, added that mycoplasma infections are also frequently associated with a rash.

bacteria infection



ST FILE PHOTO

There are more than 120 species of the mycoplasma bacteria, of which three can cause diseases in humans.

Swabs from the throat or blood samples are taken and examined for evidence of mycoplasma.

The condition can be spread by respiratory droplets during close contact with a patient who has the symptoms. The bacteria can stay in a person's body for two to three weeks before causing illness.

The symptoms may last between a week and a month on average and patients are infectious for up to several weeks.

A patient with mild upper respiratory tract infection caused by mycoplasma may recover without antibiotics. In more serious cases, antibiotics are required.

Asked when outbreaks commonly occur, Dr Pek Wee Yang, a senior consultant respiratory physician at the department of respiratory medicine at Tan Tock Seng Hospital, said: "It is common in autumn and winter months in temperate countries. Locally, it can occur year-round.

"Outbreaks here have been reported among military recruits and in nursing homes."

Dr Menon advised infected patients to cover their mouths when they cough, wash their hands often and avoid sharing utensils to minimise the spread of the bacteria to family members or people in close contact with them.

Like the flu, people can suffer from a mycoplasma infection over and over again.

Ms Wong had a sore throat, inflamed lymph nodes and a gum ache last month. She said: "I had a suspicion it was the resurrexion of mycoplasma."

The lung specialist she went to confirmed her worst fears.

Dr Ong said: "Immunity against mycoplasma seems to wane after several years. Recurrent mycoplasma infections are definitely possible.

"The bacteria that is naturally hosted in the body will become resistant to antibiotics if there is repeated exposure, making future infections much harder to treat."

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