

Viral Pneumonia Is So Mild, Many Don't Know It's There

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President Nixon, one of the healthiest of Americans, was sent to the hospital yesterday with a disease that is generally mild, so mild, in fact, that many persons with viral pneumonia do not even know that they have it and, if they do, are often cared for at home.

Caught by exposure to any one of many viruses, usually by contact with other persons, it usually follows even milder, cold-like symptoms, sometimes so slight that they may seem to be no more than a slight headache or scratchy throat.

Despite this generally benign history, it is also a disease with severe forms, and it may occasionally turn from mild to severe. This, doctors said yesterday, calls for prudence in caring for any 60-year-old man, and a high degree of prudence in caring for any President.

Doctors also agreed: a man with the President's robust health history should have no trouble making a fast recovery from mild viral pneumonia. Including yesterday, the Pres-

ident had not heretofore missed a day at work in his more than four years in office.

Doctors disagreed on whether a national leader under recent emotional stress might be more susceptible to coming down with an illness like pneumonia. "I wouldn't expect so at all," one said, especially a man so well over the years, according to all we've been told about his checkups.

Another doctor said: "There is no hard data to prove it, but host factors are always important. I would have no idea whether this applies to the President, but I can only say that if any man should be overworked or fatigued or under great enough stress, these are things that can interfere with the body's defense mechanisms."

Viral pneumonia is usually less serious than bacterial pneumonia, and doctors in fact usually diagnose it by its less severe symptoms and the less severe involvement of the lungs—a patchy look, rather than solid areas of fluid—seen in X-rays.

It takes two or three days, often, to culture a specific virus or variety of bacteria in the laboratory, thus making a surer diagnosis. Often none at all can be grown in the lab, but the very fact of the illness still says one is present.

The disease's incubation period is usually three to seven days, but the onset of symptoms can be sudden.

"It's not surprising at all" that the President looked perfectly healthy to those who saw him only Wednesday night, said Dr. Sol Katz, professor of medicine and head of the pulmonary division at George-town University medical school.

"You may think you just have a headache and take a few aspirin and look all right to everyone," he said, but wake up, as the President did, with a fever and more severe illness.

The fact that the President has virus pneumonia, Katz emphasized, "does not necessarily indicate that it's an over-

whelming or a serious situation. So many people have virus pneumonia, in fact, that it is often referred to as 'walking pneumonia.'"

It also accounts for some 75 per cent of all acute or short-term lung infections.

Symptoms commonly vary from mild fever and discomfort to harsher ones. The disease is often treated with antibiotics, though they are not effective against viruses in most cases. But again, doctors often feel they should take every possible measure when only their judgment and no specific laboratory test can tell them the cause.

Dr. Walter Tkach, the President's doctor, said last night that antibiotics would not be used, and Mr. Nixon would have only bed rest and "supportive therapy"—medicines relieve pain and discomfort and "something to make him sleep if he needs it."

Pain is common in viral pneumonia, said Katz. So are a headache, and often a wracking cough that disturbs rest. "Still," he said, "the patient is usually not as toxically ill as he is with bacterial pneumonia."

The chest pain of pneumonia—the President first complained early yesterday morning of pain on the right side of his chest—is usually caused by inflammation of the pleura, the membrane that covers the lung and chest wall.

Another Washington chest physician, Dr. Robert Langevin, said, "We haven't heard of any run of viral pneumonia really going around lately. But there's always a little."

And sometimes it suddenly shows up in the seemingly healthiest of individuals.

Dr. Tkach has said that he considered Mr. Nixon "one of the healthiest presidents in history." Last night's hospitalization was the first major illness for Mr. Nixon.

A year ago, in an interview with Medical Tribune, Tkach said that Mr. Nixon "hasn't missed a day's work because of illness in the past four years.

"The worst think he's had up to now has been a sore throat," the doctor continued. "There was one episode in which the press picked up he had a cold, but by the time I got to him he said it had disappeared."

Tkach, an Air Force major general, said the President never complains about feeling ill.

He never needs anything. He has made a statement to me and others that he has never had a headache, for which I'm grateful."

At 5:30 yesterday morning, however, the President did complain of a pain in the right side of his chest—indicating that the pneumonia was effecting his right lung.

President Nixon had his last physical exam last Dec. 20. At that time Tkach said the President was in "fine" shape, but complained that he wasn't getting enough exercise.

The President weighed 173 pounds then—exactly what he weighed one year ago, one pound more than he weighed two years ago and exactly what he weighed 20 years ago when Tkach first examined him. His blood pressure was well within the normal range.

Tkach has continually complained that President Nixon fails to get enough exercise.

"He always agrees," the doctor told Medical Tribune. "He used to bowl twice a week in the old Executive Office Building, but no longer does so. He golfs, but hasn't golfed in quite a while. Half the time at Camp David he'll bowl or walk. At Key Biscayne and San Clemente he'll swim and walk along the beach."

According to Tkach, the President averages six hours of sleep a night, although he often stays in bed eight or nine hours on weekends.