

Medical Urgent Care
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McKesson Clinical Reference Products: Women's Health Advisor 9.0
Illustration

Acute Bronchitis

What is acute bronchitis?

Bronchitis is swelling and irritation in the air passages that connect the windpipe with the lungs. With acute bronchitis you usually have a cough that produces phlegm, and pain behind the breastbone when you breathe deeply or cough.

How does it occur?

Bronchitis is usually caused by viral infections of the respiratory tract, such as the common cold or the flu. Bacterial infections may rarely cause acute bronchitis. It may also occur with childhood illnesses, such as measles and whooping cough.

Attacks are most frequent during the winter.

Infants, young children, the elderly, smokers, and people with lung and heart diseases are most likely to get acute bronchitis.

What are the symptoms?

Symptoms may include:

- a deep cough that produces yellowish or greenish phlegm
- pain behind the breastbone when you breathe deeply or cough
- wheezing
- breathlessness
- chills
- headache
- sore muscles.

How is it diagnosed?

The doctor will examine you and ask about your symptoms. Usually, acute bronchitis is diagnosed without specific tests. In some cases, he or she may want you to have tests, such as:

- phlegm specimen analysis if your phlegm has blood in it
- culture of the back of the throat
- chest x-ray
- blood tests.

How is it treated?

Usually, treatment of acute bronchitis focuses on medications that treat the symptoms such as for pain relief,

suppression of cough, and relief of nasal congestion. In addition, drinking fluids and eating a healthy diet important. If a treatable infection is clearly the cause of the bronchitis, specific therapy such as medicine to treat the influenza virus may be necessary. Only rarely are antibiotics needed.

How long will the effects last?

Bronchitis develops suddenly and clears up quickly in most cases. Most people fully recover within two weeks. Occasionally, the cough may persist for as long as six or eight weeks after the initial infection. It may take you longer to recover if:

- You are a smoker.
- You have a heart or lung disease.
- You live in an area where air pollution is a problem.
- You have any other continuing health problems.

How can I take care of myself?

You can help yourself by:

- following the full treatment your doctor recommends
- using a vaporizer, humidifier, or steam from hot water to add moisture to the air
- drinking plenty of liquids
- taking over-the-counter medicine to relieve symptoms.
- resting in bed
- taking aspirin-like medicine or acetaminophen to reduce fever and relieve headache and muscle pain (no one under age 21 should take aspirin because of the risk of Reye's syndrome)
- eating nutritious, balanced meals.

Call the doctor if:

- You have trouble breathing.
- You have a fever over 101 degrees F (38.3 degrees C).
- You cough up blood.
- You don't feel better in 3 days.
- You have any symptoms that concern you.

How can I help prevent and avoid spreading acute bronchitis?

To reduce your risk of getting a respiratory infection:

- Do not smoke.
- Eat healthy foods.
- Get regular exercise.
- Wash your hands often.

If you have acute bronchitis caused by a bacterial infection, take the following steps to help avoid spreading it:

- Take anti-bacterial medicine as directed by the doctor.
- Avoid close contact with healthy people for 24 to 48 hours from when you start taking these medicines.
- Use tissues when you cough.
- Wash your hands with soap and warm water after you cough, sneeze, or wipe your nose or mouth, especially before touching food, glasses, dishes, or silverware.

- Don't share food, eating utensils, drinking cups, or towels with others.

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