

Acute Bronchitis

What is acute bronchitis?

Bronchitis is an infection of the air passages that connect the windpipe to the lungs. It causes swelling and irritation of the airways. 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 often occurs with viral infections of the respiratory tract, such as colds and flu. Bronchitis may also be caused by bacterial infections. It may occur with childhood illnesses such as measles and whooping cough.

Attacks are most frequent during the winter or when the level of air pollution is high.

Infants, young children, older adults, smokers, and people with lung or heart disease 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
- feeling short of breath
- fever
- chills
- headache
- sore muscles.

How is it diagnosed?

Your healthcare provider will examine you and ask about your symptoms. You may have tests, such as:

- a test of phlegm to look for bacteria
- chest X-ray
- blood tests.

How is it treated?

Acute bronchitis often does not require medical treatment. Resting at home and drinking plenty of fluids to keep the mucus loose may be all you need to do to get better in a few days. If your symptoms are severe or you have other health problems (such as heart or lung disease or diabetes), you may need to take antibiotics.

How long will the effects last?

Most of the time acute bronchitis clears up in a few days. Your cough may slowly get better in 1 to 2 weeks.

It may take you longer to recover if:

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

How can I take care of myself?

You can help yourself by:

- following the full treatment your healthcare provider recommends
- using a vaporizer, humidifier, or steam from hot water to add moisture to the air
- drinking plenty of liquids
- taking cough medicine if recommended by your healthcare provider, many times it is best to “cough it out” in the day and suppress it only at night to rest.
- resting in bed
- taking aspirin or acetaminophen to reduce fever and relieve headache and muscle pain (no one 18 years of age and under should take aspirin because of the risk of Reye's syndrome)
- eating healthy meals.

Call your healthcare provider if:

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

How can I help prevent acute bronchitis?

To reduce your risk of getting a respiratory infection:

- Do not smoke.
- Wash your hands often.

Get regular exercise.
Eat healthy foods.