

Acute Bronchitis

What is acute bronchitis?

Acute bronchitis is an infection of the bronchial tree. The bronchial (say: “brawn-kee-ull”) tree is made up of the tubes that carry air into your lungs. When these tubes get infected, they swell and mucus (thick fluid) forms. This makes it hard for you to breathe. You may cough up mucus and you may wheeze (make a whistling sound when you breathe).

What causes acute bronchitis?

Acute bronchitis is almost always caused by viruses that attack the lining of the bronchial tree and cause infection. As your body fights back against these viruses, more swelling occurs and more mucus is made. It takes time for your body to kill the viruses and heal the damage to your bronchial tubes.

In most cases, the same viruses that cause colds cause acute bronchitis. Research has shown that bacterial infection is much less common in bronchitis than we used to think. Very rarely, an infection caused by a fungus can cause acute bronchitis.

How do people get acute bronchitis?

The viruses that cause acute bronchitis are sprayed into the air or onto people’s hands when they cough. You can get acute bronchitis if you breathe in these viruses. You can also get it if you touch a hand that is coated with the viruses.

If you smoke or are around damaging fumes (such as those in certain kinds of factories), you are more likely to get acute bronchitis and to have it longer. This is because your bronchial tree is already damaged.

How is acute bronchitis treated?

Most cases of acute bronchitis will go away on their own after a few days or a week. Because acute bronchitis is usually caused by viruses, antibiotics (medicines that kill bacteria) usually do not help. Even if you cough up mucus that is colored or thick, antibiotics probably won’t help you get better any faster.

If you smoke, you should cut down on the number of cigarettes you smoke, or stop smoking altogether. This will help your bronchial tree heal faster.

For some people with acute bronchitis, doctors prescribe medicines that are usually used to treat asthma. These medicines can help open the bronchial tubes and clear out mucus. They are usually given with an inhaler. An inhaler sprays the medicine right into the bronchial tree. Your doctor will decide if this treatment is right for you.

How long will the cough from acute bronchitis last?

You should call your doctor

if:

- You continue to wheeze and cough for more than 1 month, especially at night or when you are active.
- You continue to cough for more than 1 month and sometimes have a bad tasting fluid come up into your mouth.
- You have a cough, you feel very sick and weak, and you have a high fever that doesn't go down.
- You cough up blood.
- You have trouble breathing when you lie down.
- Your feet swell.

Sometimes the cough from acute bronchitis lasts for several weeks or months. Usually this happens because the bronchial tree is taking a long time to heal. However, a cough that doesn't go away may be a sign of another problem, like asthma or pneumonia.

How can I keep from getting acute bronchitis again?

If you smoke, the best defense against acute bronchitis is to quit. Smoking damages your bronchial tree and makes it easier for viruses to cause infection. Smoking also slows down the healing, so it takes longer for you to get well. Another way to keep from getting acute bronchitis is to wash your hands often to get rid of any viruses.

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This handout provides a general overview on this topic and may not apply to everyone. To find out if this handout applies to you and to get more information on this subject, talk to your family doctor.

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