

Acute Bronchitis



Lung
Foundation
Australia

when you can't breathe... nothing else matters®

Overview

Acute bronchitis is the sudden onset of inflammation in the major airways (bronchial tubes) of the lungs. It usually starts with an infection in the nose or throat which then travels to the bronchial tubes. When the body tries to fight the infection, it causes these tubes to swell which triggers you to cough. Acute bronchitis is temporary and usually does not cause any permanent difficulty with breathing.

Causes

The most common cause of acute bronchitis is a viral infection, which means it can be contagious. Less commonly it can be caused by:

- **Environmental factors:** such as smoke, chemical fumes and air pollution.
- **Bacterial infection**
- **Association with other diseases:** such as chronic bronchitis or asthma.

Symptoms

The first symptoms of acute bronchitis are similar to having a cold or flu, followed by a cough.

Other common symptoms include:

- A runny or stuffy nose which starts a few days before the chest congestion
- Coughing* up phlegm/mucus that may be yellow or green in colour
- Feeling tired or fatigued
- Sore chest from long periods of coughing
- Wheezing or whistling sound while breathing
- Not being able to be as active as normal.

** Although the infection usually lasts for 3 - 10 days, the cough may continue for several weeks.*

Who gets acute bronchitis?

Acute bronchitis can affect males and females of all ages and ethnic backgrounds. It is more common during winter, especially during flu outbreaks. Individuals more at risk include:

- The elderly
- Young children
- Those with a weakened immune system
- Those not immunised for the flu, pneumonia and whooping cough
- Association with other diseases (such as chronic bronchitis or asthma).

Diagnosis

There are no specific tests to diagnose acute bronchitis apart from a physical examination, which will include listening to your lungs. However, if your doctor is concerned that pneumonia may be present, they may organise a chest X-ray. Other tests are rarely done unless your doctor thinks you might have an additional infection.

Experience

In most cases, people find that acute bronchitis clears up on its own in several days. However for some people, symptoms can last longer, including a cough that can last for a month or more. In some cases, people experience more severe symptoms over a longer period of time. This can sometimes lead to complications such as pneumonia.

Please see an overview of treatment and management options in the next section.



Treatment

In most cases there is no treatment for acute bronchitis, and it will go away on its own. Drinking plenty of liquids, resting and/or taking a pain reliever may, however, help to ease symptoms.

Occasionally other treatment options will include:

- **Antibiotics**

Your doctor will **not usually** prescribe antibiotics for acute bronchitis caused by a virus, because antibiotics do not work on viruses. Antibiotics may, however, be prescribed if your doctor is concerned you are at high risk of developing pneumonia.

- **Bronchodilators**

Bronchodilators are medicines used to open up the airways (for example, Salbutamol/Ventolin). They are not usually helpful to reduce a cough in people with acute bronchitis, but may reduce wheezing or chest tightness in some patients.

- **Cough suppressants**

Cough suppressants often make little difference to people who have acute bronchitis. Some people, however, may use them when their cough is troubling, especially when it disturbs sleep.

Self-management options include:

- **Quitting smoking**

Quitting smoking or avoiding second-hand smoke can help to relieve symptoms. Having acute bronchitis is a good opportunity to review your smoking habit and to discuss strategies with your doctor to support you to quit.

- **Avoiding irritants**

Avoiding irritants such as dust, chemical fumes or air pollution can not only help protect your lungs if you have acute bronchitis, but also help prevent infection. Wearing a mask over your mouth and nose can also help reduce the risk in these situations.

Preventive options to reduce the risk of acute bronchitis reoccurring include:

- **Staying active and healthy**

Being physically active, eating well, getting plenty of rest and washing your hands often to reduce exposure to viruses and bacteria, are all things you can do to limit your risk of infection.

- **Ensuring your vaccinations are up-to-date**

This may include discussing a seasonal flu vaccination and the pneumonia vaccine with your doctor, in order to help support your immune system.



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Lung Foundation Australia Services

- Information and support Line
- Lung disease information resources
- Education seminars and webinars
- Lung cancer support nurse
- Support groups
- Peer-to-peer connections
- Referral to pulmonary rehabilitation and Lungs in Action exercise programs
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