

Bronchitis

Bronchitis (bron-KI-tis) is a condition in which the bronchial tubes, the tubes that carry air to your lungs, become inflamed. People who have bronchitis often have a cough that brings up mucus. Mucus is a slimy substance made by the lining of the bronchial tubes. Bronchitis also may cause wheezing (a whistling or squeaky sound when you breathe), chest pain or discomfort, a low fever, and shortness of breath.

Overview

There are two main types of bronchitis: acute (short term) and chronic (ongoing).

Acute Bronchitis

Infections or other factors that irritate the lungs cause acute bronchitis. The same viruses that cause colds and the flu often cause acute bronchitis. These viruses are spread through the air when people cough. They also are spread through physical contact (for example, on hands that have not been washed). Sometimes bacteria cause acute bronchitis. Acute bronchitis lasts from a few days to 10 days. However, the cough that occurs may last for several weeks after the infection is gone. Several factors increase the risk for acute bronchitis. Examples include tobacco smoke (including secondhand smoke), air pollution, dust, and fumes. Avoiding these lung irritants as much as possible can help lower your risk for acute bronchitis. Most cases of acute bronchitis go away within a few days. If you think you have acute bronchitis, see your doctor. He or she will want to rule out other, more serious health conditions that need medical care.

Chronic Bronchitis

Chronic bronchitis is an ongoing, serious condition. It occurs when the lining of the bronchial tubes is constantly irritated and inflamed. Bronchitis is "chronic" if you have a cough with mucus on most days for **at least 3 months a year and 2 years in a row** (without another apparent cause). Smoking is the main cause of chronic bronchitis. Viruses or bacteria can easily infect the irritated bronchial tubes. When this happens, the condition worsens and lasts longer. As a result, people who have chronic bronchitis also have periods when symptoms get much worse than usual. Chronic bronchitis is a serious, long-term medical condition. Early diagnosis and treatment, combined with quitting cigarette smoking and avoiding secondhand cigarette smoke, can help people live better with this condition. The chance of complete recovery is low for people who have severe chronic bronchitis.

Other Names for Bronchitis

Acute bronchitis Chronic bronchitis Industrial bronchitis

What Causes Bronchitis?

Acute Bronchitis

Infections or other factors that irritate your lungs cause acute bronchitis. The same viruses that cause colds and the flu are the most common cause of acute bronchitis. Sometimes bacteria can cause the condition.

Certain substances can irritate your lungs and airways and raise your risk for acute bronchitis. For example, inhaling or being exposed to cigarette or cigar smoke, air pollution, dusts, vapors, or fumes raises your risk. These lung irritants also can make symptoms worse. Being exposed to a high level of dust or fumes, such as from an explosion or a big fire, also may lead to acute bronchitis. **Chronic Bronchitis**

Repeatedly breathing in fumes that irritate and damage lung and airway tissues causes chronic bronchitis. Smoking is the major cause of this condition. Breathing in air pollution and dust or fumes from the environment or the workplace also can lead to chronic bronchitis. People who have chronic bronchitis go through periods when symptoms become much worse than usual. During these times, they also may have acute viral or bacterial bronchitis.

Who Is At Risk for Bronchitis?

Bronchitis is a very common condition. Millions of cases occur every year. Elderly people, infants, and young children are at higher risk for acute bronchitis than people in other age groups. People of all ages can get chronic bronchitis, but it occurs more often in people who are older than 45. Women are more than twice as likely to be diagnosed with chronic bronchitis as men. Smoking and having an existing lung disease greatly increase your risk for bronchitis. Contact with chemical fumes, vapors, and dusts from certain jobs—such as those in coal mining, textile manufacturing, and grain handling—also increases your risk for the condition. Air pollution, infections, and allergies can worsen the symptoms of chronic bronchitis, especially if you smoke.

What Are the Signs and Symptoms of Bronchitis?

Acute Bronchitis

Acute bronchitis caused by an infection usually develops after you already have a cold or the flu. Symptoms of a cold or the flu include sore throat, fatigue (tiredness), fever, body aches, stuffy or runny nose, vomiting, and diarrhea. The main symptom of acute bronchitis is a cough. The cough may produce clear mucus (a slimy substance). If the mucus is yellow or green, you may have a bacterial infection as well. Even after the infection clears up, you may still have a dry cough for days or weeks. Other symptoms of acute bronchitis include wheezing (a whistling or squeaky sound when you breathe), low fever, and chest tightness or pain. If your acute bronchitis is severe, you also may have shortness of breath, especially with physical activity. **Chronic Bronchitis**

The signs and symptoms of chronic bronchitis include coughing, wheezing, and chest discomfort. The coughing may produce large amounts of mucus. This type of cough is often called "smoker's cough."

How Is Bronchitis Diagnosed?

Your doctor usually will diagnose bronchitis based on your signs and symptoms. He or she may ask questions about your cough, such as how long you've had it, what you're coughing up, and how much you cough. Your doctor also will likely ask:

- About your medical history
- Whether you've recently had a cold or the flu
- Whether you smoke or spend time around others who smoke
- Whether you've been exposed to air pollution, dust, or fumes

Your doctor will use a stethoscope to listen for wheezing (a whistling or squeaky sound when you breathe) or other abnormal sounds in your lungs. He or she also may:

- Look at your mucus to see whether you have a bacterial infection
- Test the oxygen levels in your blood using a sensor attached to your fingertip or toe
- Order a chest x ray, lung function tests, or blood tests

How Is Bronchitis Treated?

The main goals of treating acute and chronic bronchitis are to relieve symptoms and help make breathing easier. If you have acute bronchitis, your doctor may recommend rest, plenty of fluids, and aspirin (for adults) or acetaminophen to treat fever. Antibiotics usually aren't prescribed for acute bronchitis. This is because they don't work against viruses—the most common cause of acute bronchitis. However, if your doctor thinks you have a bacterial infection, he or she may prescribe antibiotics.

A humidifier or steam can help loosen mucus and relieve wheezing and limited air flow. If your bronchitis causes wheezing, you may need an inhaled medicine to open your airways. You take this medicine using an inhaler. This device allows the medicine to go right to your lungs.

Your doctor also may prescribe medicines to relieve or reduce your cough and treat your inflamed airways (especially if your cough persists). To lower your risk of getting bronchitis, your doctor also may suggest a flu shot and/or a pneumonia vaccine (if you're aged 60 or older). If you have chronic bronchitis and have also been diagnosed with COPD (chronic obstructive pulmonary disease), you may need medicines to open your airways and help clear away mucus. These medicines include bronchodilators (inhaled) and steroids (inhaled or pill form).

Sometimes people who have chronic bronchitis need oxygen therapy to help them breathe better and get enough oxygen to their bodies.

One of the best ways to treat acute and chronic bronchitis is to remove the source of irritation and damage to the lungs. If you smoke cigarettes, it's very important to quit. Talk to your doctor about programs and products that can help you quit smoking. Try to avoid secondhand smoke. Also, try to avoid places with a lot of dusts, fumes, vapors, or air pollutants.

How Can Bronchitis Be Prevented?

You can't always prevent acute or chronic bronchitis. However, you can take steps to lower your risk for both types of the condition. The most important step is to quit smoking or not start smoking. Try to avoid other lung irritants, such as secondhand smoke, fumes, air pollution, and dust. For example, wear a mask over your mouth and nose when you use paint, paint remover, varnish, or other things with strong fumes. This will help protect your lungs. Wash your hands often to reduce exposure to germs and bacteria. Get a flu shot every year, especially if you have lung problems. Get a pneumonia vaccine as your doctor advises if you're aged 60 or older.

Living With Chronic Bronchitis

If you have chronic bronchitis, you can take steps to control your symptoms. Lifestyle changes and ongoing care can help you manage the condition.

Lifestyle Changes

The most important step is to quit smoking or not start smoking. Avoid other lung irritants, such as secondhand smoke, fumes, air pollution, and dust. This will help keep your lungs healthy.

Wash your hands often to lower your risk for a viral or bacterial infection. Also, try to stay away from people who have colds or the flu. See your doctor right away if you have signs or symptoms of a cold or the flu.

Follow a healthy diet and be as physically active as you can. A healthy diet includes a variety of fruits, vegetables, and whole grains. It also includes lean meats, poultry, fish, and fat-free or low-fat milk or milk products. A healthy diet also is low in saturated fat, trans fat, cholesterol, sodium (salt), and added sugar.

For more information on following a healthy diet, see the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute's Aim for a Healthy Weight Web site, "Your Guide to a Healthy Heart," and "Your Guide to Lowering Your Blood Pressure With DASH." All of these resources include general advice about healthy eating.

Ongoing Care

See your doctor regularly and take all your medicines as prescribed. Also, talk to your doctor about getting a yearly flu shot and/or a pneumonia vaccine. If you have chronic bronchitis, pulmonary rehabilitation (rehab) may help improve your breathing. Pulmonary rehab is a breathing exercise program that's supervised by a respiratory therapist. This is a health care worker who knows about lung treatments. Talk to your doctor about whether rehab may benefit you. People who have chronic bronchitis often breathe fast. Talk to your doctor about a breathing method called pursed-lip breathing. This breathing method may help you feel better because it slows down your breathing. To do pursed-lip breathing, take a deep breath. Then, slowly breathe out through your mouth. At the same time, hold your lips as if you're going to kiss someone.

Key Points

- Bronchitis is a condition in which the bronchial tubes, the tubes that carry air to your lungs, become inflamed.
- People who have bronchitis often have a cough that brings up mucus. Mucus is a slimy substance made by the lining of the bronchial tubes. Bronchitis also may cause wheezing (a whistling or squeaky sound when you breathe), chest pain or discomfort, a low fever, and shortness of breath.
- There are two main types of bronchitis: acute and chronic. Infections or other factors that irritate the lungs cause acute bronchitis. The condition lasts from a few days to 10 days. However, the cough that occurs may last for several weeks after the infection is gone. Chronic bronchitis is an ongoing, serious condition. It occurs when the lining of the bronchial tubes is permanently irritated and inflamed.
- The same viruses that cause colds and the flu are the most common cause of acute bronchitis. Exposure to lung irritants also raises your risk for acute bronchitis. Examples of lung irritants include tobacco smoke, air pollution, dusts, vapors, and fumes.
- Smoking is the major cause of chronic bronchitis. Breathing in air pollution or dust or fumes from the environment or workplace also can lead to chronic bronchitis.
- Bronchitis is a very common condition. Millions of cases occur each year. Elderly people, infants, and young children are at higher risk for acute bronchitis than people in other age groups. Smoking and having an existing lung disease greatly increases your risk for bronchitis.
- Signs and symptoms of bronchitis are a cough that produces mucus, wheezing, low fever, and chest tightness or pain.
- Your doctor usually will diagnose bronchitis based on your signs and symptoms. Tests also may be used to diagnose bronchitis.
- Treatment for acute bronchitis may include rest, fluids, aspirin (for adults) or acetaminophen to treat fever, and avoiding lung irritants. You also may need medicines or treatments to open your airways, help clear away mucus, and help you stay as healthy as possible. Treatment for chronic bronchitis may include medicines or oxygen therapy. One of the best ways to treat acute and chronic bronchitis is to remove the source of irritation and damage to the lungs.
- You can't always prevent acute or chronic bronchitis. However, you can take steps to lower your risk for both types of the condition. The most important step is to quit smoking or not start smoking. Also, avoid other lung irritants, wash your hands often, and talk to your doctor about getting a yearly flu shot and a pneumonia vaccine.
- If you have chronic bronchitis you can take steps to control your symptoms. Don't smoke and avoid other lung irritants; wash your hands often and stay away from people who have colds or the flu. Follow a healthy diet and be as physically active as you can. Take all of your medicines as prescribed, and talk to your doctor about whether other treatments or therapies can help you.

Links to Other Information About Bronchitis

NHLBI Resources COPD (Diseases and Conditions Index) (<https://web.archive.org/web/20130314070341/http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/public/lung/copd/>)

Non-NHLBI Resources Bronchitis (MedlinePlus) (<https://web.archive.org/web/20130127034938/http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/chronicbronchitis.html>)

External Links

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