Bronchiectasis means the airways in your lungs aren't working properly.

If you have bronchiectasis some of the airways in your lungs are too wide. This usually happens because the walls of the airways have been damaged. When the airways are too wide, mucus builds up inside them.

When you have a lot of mucus in your lungs you may find it hard to cough it all out. The mucus that gets left behind can be infected by bacteria. This can cause a chest infection.

Most people who have bronchiectasis have a condition called cystic fibrosis. Cystic fibrosis is an inherited condition. People with this condition are usually diagnosed when they are babies or young children. Some people have other inherited conditions such as alpha-1 antitrypsin deficiency. Adults who get bronchiectasis might get it after an infection, such as measles or tuberculosis (TB), or after breathing in a harmful chemical.

The main symptom of bronchiectasis is coughing up a lot of mucus (also called sputum). You might cough up as much as half a litre (one pint) of mucus in a day. You might also feel breathless, cough up blood, wheeze, and get tired.

These symptoms can be alarming and can make you feel unwell. If you have a child with bronchiectasis it can be especially distressing to watch this happening to them. If the symptoms seem worse than usual you should talk to your doctor right away.

Exercises to strengthen your chest muscles can make it easier to breathe more freely and to live a more normal life. To train your chest muscles you breathe in through a device that makes your muscles work harder. You'll be shown how to use the device by a doctor, nurse, or other health professional. You'll probably have to do these exercises for 30 minutes a day, five days a week.

Many doctors recommend a type of physiotherapy that aims to clear mucus out of the lungs. Some people find it helpful to blow into a small device that helps them to loosen
the mucus. You might be asked to move into different positions, so that gravity helps the mucus to drain out of the lungs. A physiotherapist might tap your chest to loosen the mucus and help it start to move.

Your doctor may also try some medicines to help you breathe more easily. The medicines might include:

- **A bronchodilator** (a drug to open up the airways). Bronchodilators are usually given by inhaler.

  These medicines can cause side effects, but they are not usually troublesome in the long term. For example, they make your hands tremble, especially when you first use them. They may also make you feel like your heart is beating faster. But this should go away if you reduce the dose.

- **A mucolytic** (a drug to break up mucus). These come as a drug that you breathe in through a mask. They are not recommended for people who don't have cystic fibrosis.

  These can cause flu-like symptoms in some people.

- **Salt water** (called hypertonic saline). This aims to make your mucus thinner. You breathe it in through a mask using a machine called a nebuliser.

**Surgery**

If parts of your lungs are very badly damaged your doctor may advise you to have an operation to remove the worst parts. But surgery for bronchiectasis is rare. Your doctor is more likely to suggest this if you often cough up a lot of blood and find it very hard to breathe properly.

In the most serious cases, doctors might recommend a lung transplant. But this is very rare.

**Other treatments you may need**

If you get a chest infection you'll need a course of **antibiotics** to kill the bacteria that are probably causing it. The sooner you start the antibiotics the better. So it's important to go to your doctor as soon as you notice:

- Any worsening of symptoms

- A change in the colour of the mucus being coughed up.

Your doctor may give you antibiotics to keep at home, so you can start taking them as soon as you feel an infection starting. But you should still go to the doctor to get the mucus tested, to check what bacteria you have. You might need a different antibiotic.
Because infections can lead to serious problems if you have bronchiectasis, you should make sure you get a flu vaccine every year.

Some people may get infections so often that they need to take antibiotics all the time. As well as preventing infections, this can give your lungs a chance to recover. Long-term antibiotics can be taken as tablets or with a nebuliser.

Using antibiotics in this way can sometimes lead to bacteria becoming resistant. If this happens the antibiotics don't work any more. So you might need to have your mucus checked regularly. If the bacteria become resistant you will need to change to a different antibiotic.

**What will happen?**

It's hard to say what will happen. Symptom severity varies from person to person. Bronchiectasis doesn't go away. But some people get more symptoms than others.

If you get a chest infection it may make your symptoms worse for a few days or weeks. This is sometimes called an exacerbation. Most people get exacerbations once or twice a year. But if you have severe bronchiectasis you could have six or more exacerbations a year.

If you get your infections treated quickly, and you can cough up mucus, you will probably be able to live with your condition quite normally.

Some people get very bad bronchiectasis. This can sometimes be life threatening for older people. This is because having difficulty breathing can put a strain on the rest of your body, including your heart.

**Where to get more help**

It can be hard to live with a lung disease like bronchiectasis. If you’d like to be put in touch with people who have the disease, or other parents whose children have it, there might be charities or support groups near you that can help. For example, in the UK, Breathe Easy might be able to help. It is part of the British Lung Foundation (http://www.blf.org.uk). Or you could try the Cystic Fibrosis Trust (https://www.cysticfibrosis.org.uk/).