

Patient information from BMJ

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Bronchitis

Bronchitis is a chest infection that causes a bad cough. It usually gets better on its own in a few weeks, but you might need to see your doctor.

What is bronchitis?

If you have bronchitis the lining of the airways in your lungs gets inflamed (swollen). This causes a cough that can become painful as it strains the muscles in your chest.

Almost all cases of bronchitis are caused by infection with a virus and get better after about three or four weeks.

Bronchitis often starts as you're getting over another illness affecting the airways, such as a cold or flu. As your body fights off the virus, the lining of the airways in your lungs gets inflamed and coated with mucus.

Children under age 4 and older people are most likely to get bronchitis, especially if they already have other health problems that affect their lungs and heart.

What are the symptoms?

The main symptom of bronchitis is a bad cough. You might also:

- feel generally unwell and tired
- have a slight fever
- have aching muscles
- wheeze (make a whistling sound when you breathe) and feel short of breath
- cough up mucus.

You should go to the doctor if you are worried about your symptoms or if you have other health problems, such as lung problems or heart disease. Young children with bronchitis should also see a doctor.

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Some symptoms might mean you have a more serious condition. You should see your doctor if you:

- have a high temperature (more than 38°C)
- feel very out of breath
- get bad chest pains
- cough up a lot of green or yellow sputum, or any blood.

Your doctor might send you for a chest x-ray to see if you have pneumonia. Pneumonia happens when germs infect the lungs, making it difficult to breathe. If this happens you will need extra treatment, and possibly antibiotics.

What treatments work?

Bronchitis usually clears up on its own. You might find that painkillers, such as paracetamol, ease your symptoms. Remember to drink plenty of fluids. Hot drinks can be comforting.

Medicines

Medicines called cough suppressants are meant to stop you coughing. Some people with a cough find them useful to get a good night's sleep.

Cough medicines called expectorants are meant to help you cough up mucus. You can buy different kinds from a pharmacy. But research suggests that they don't help with bronchitis.

If you are wheezing a lot your doctor might recommend an inhaler like those used for people with asthma. This might reduce cough and wheezing while you are getting better. But it will not clear up the bronchitis any faster.

Antibiotics might clear up your cough about half a day sooner if your bronchitis is caused by a bacteria. But most cases of bronchitis are caused by a virus. Antibiotics don't work on viruses.

Doctors don't usually prescribe antibiotics for bronchitis because they only work on bronchitis caused by bacteria, they don't make much difference, and they can cause side effects.

What will happen to me?

Your cough should clear up in about 7 to 10 days, but it could last longer. Many people cough for three weeks or more. If you have a very bad cough with other symptoms, such as a high fever, you should see your doctor.

Some other conditions can be made worse by bronchitis. For example, if you have asthma, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), or heart disease, bronchitis might make this worse. You should see your doctor if this happens. Your doctor might need to adjust your usual treatment to help. Smoking makes bronchitis worse, and you should try to stop.

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