ACUTE BRONCHITIS

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Learn About Acute Bronchitis

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Key Facts

- Acute bronchitis comes on suddenly.
- It means that the tubes that carry air to your lungs are inflamed.
- It usually gets better on its own without the need for antibiotics.
- The infection usually lasts for 3-10 days, but the cough can continue for several weeks.
- It is different from chronic bronchitis, a chronic disease for which there is no cure.

What Is Acute Bronchitis?

Acute bronchitis is the sudden development of inflammation in bronchial tubes—the major airways into your lungs. It usually happens because of a virus or breathing in things that irritate the lungs such as tobacco smoke, fumes, dust, and air pollution. Bacteria sometimes cause acute bronchitis.

How Acute Bronchitis Affects Your Body

In acute bronchitis, cells that line the bronchi become infected. The infection usually starts in the nose or throat and travels to the bronchial tubes. When the body tries to fight the infection, it causes the bronchial tubes to swell. This causes you to cough. Sometimes it is a dry cough, but often you will cough up mucus (sputum). The inflammation also causes less air to be able to move through the bronchial tubes, which can cause wheezing, chest tightness, and shortness of breath. Eventually, the immune system fights off the infection. Acute bronchitis usually lasts for 3-10 days. However, your cough and mucus (sputum) production can last for several weeks after the infection has cleared.

How Serious Is Acute Bronchitis?

Acute bronchitis is temporary and usually does not cause any permanent breathing difficulties. It is possible for people with weakened immune systems or other major health problems to develop severe problems such as pneumonia or respiratory failure. In general, those who develop major problems from acute bronchitis are:
- The elderly
- Young children
- People with other major health conditions including cancer or diabetes
- People who have not been immunized for the flu, pneumonia, and whooping cough.

Acute Bronchitis Symptoms, Causes, and Risk Factors

Acute bronchitis is sometimes diagnosed as pneumonia, but a chest X-ray can help distinguish between the two.

What Are the Symptoms of Acute Bronchitis?

The most common symptoms of acute bronchitis are:
- Coughing up mucus that may be yellow or green
- Runny and stuffy nose starting a few days before the chest congestion
- Feeling run-down or tired
Sore ribs from prolonged periods of coughing  
Not being able to be as active  
Wheezing or a whistling sound while breathing

What Causes Acute Bronchitis?  
Acute bronchitis is usually caused by a respiratory virus and occasionally by bacterial infection, although this occurs in less than 10% of cases).

What Are Risk Factors for Acute Bronchitis?  
- Close contact with someone who has a cold or acute bronchitis  
- Failure to get age-appropriate immunizations (shots)  
- Exposure to tobacco smoke, fumes, dust, and air pollution

When to See Your Doctor  
You should see your doctor if you think you have acute bronchitis and if your symptoms persist.

Diagnosing and Treating Acute Bronchitis  
It is important to get your questions about acute bronchitis answered by a health-care professional.

What to Expect  
- A physical examination, and possibly an X-ray if you've had fever  
- Resting and getting plenty of fluids  
- Symptoms that last a few weeks

How Is Acute Bronchitis Diagnosed?  
Health-care providers diagnose acute bronchitis by asking patients questions about symptoms and doing a physical examination. They rarely order additional tests to diagnose acute bronchitis. If you have or recently had a fever, your provider might order a chest X-ray to rule out pneumonia.

How Is Acute Bronchitis Treated?  
Most cases of acute bronchitis go away on their own. The infection simply has to run its course over several weeks. Your doctor may recommend rest, fluids, a cough suppressant, and/or a pain reliever. A humidifier or steam may also help. You may need inhaled medicine to open your airways if you are wheezing. Antibiotics haven’t been proven to shorten the course of acute bronchitis or lessen symptoms. Because viruses cause most cases, antibiotics are not generally used, as they are only effective against bacteria. Additionally, using antibiotics when they aren’t recommended can not only cause side effects, but also might mean that your body won’t respond to antibiotics when it needs to. If your doctor thinks that bacteria caused your acute bronchitis, he or she might then prescribe antibiotics.

Managing and Preventing Acute Bronchitis

Managing Acute Bronchitis  
On average, the symptoms of acute bronchitis last only a couple of weeks. However if you have a cough that won’t go away, it may be the sign of a more serious disease and you should visit your doctor.

What to Expect  
- Needing to miss school or work for a few days because of symptoms  
- Having a hacking cough that lasts up to 3 weeks but gradually improves  
- Acute bronchitis usually runs its course over a week or two. However, your doctor may suggest over-the-counter medications and/or a humidifier to reduce your symptoms. Learn more about treating acute bronchitis.
Preventing Acute Bronchitis
Avoiding lung irritants is important for preventing acute bronchitis as well as treating it. If you smoke, quit. To help protect your lungs, wear a mask over your mouth and nose when using lung irritants such as paint, paint remover, or varnish.

Other ways to help prevent acute bronchitis include:
- Wash your hands often to reduce your exposure to viruses and bacteria.
- Get a flu shot every year.
- Ask your doctor if you should get a pneumonia shot, especially if you’re 60 or older.

Finding Support
The Lung Association recommends patients and caregivers join our Living with Lung Disease Support Community to connect with others facing this disease. You can also call the Lung Association’s Lung Helpline at 1-800-LUNGUSA to talk to a trained respiratory professional who can help answer your questions and connect you with additional support.

Questions to Ask Your Doctor About Acute Bronchitis
Making notes before your visit, as well as taking along a trusted family member or friend, can help you through the first appointment with your doctor.
- Am I contagious?
- Do I need to get a chest X-ray? (Most of the time, the answer is “No.”)
- Should I be concerned about having a fever?
- Should I take guaifenesin (an expectorant) or another over-the-counter cough and cold product?

Author
Alex H. Gifford, MD, FCCP
chestfoundation.org/patienteducation