

Bronchitis (chest cold)

What is it?

Bronchitis is inflammation in the large airways of the lungs (the **bronchi**). Bronchitis can be mild or severe and can last from a few days to several weeks or more. Bronchitis is often simply called a **chest cold**.

What causes it?

A chest cold is usually caused by a viral infection. The viral infection spreads to your lungs from your nose, sinuses, or throat. Sometimes a second, bacterial infection can also affect the lungs. This is usually the case only in patients with previously damaged lungs.

People at risk for bronchitis include:

- Elderly people
- Infants and young children
- Smokers
- People with heart or lung disease

Allergies and irritants in the air (like pollution, smoke, dust, or chemicals) can make bronchitis worse.

What are the symptoms?

Symptoms of bronchitis include the following:

- **Cough with mucus** (as you get better, your cough may become more dry)
- **Chest discomfort or pain**, especially with coughing or taking a deep breath.
- **Wheezing**, a high whistling sound when you breathe out
- **Fatigue**
- **Fever**

If you have **chronic bronchitis**, you may have other symptoms. Chronic bronchitis is a cough with mucus for at least 3 months in each of two consecutive years.



Bronchitis is really a “cold” in your chest. It is usually caused when a viral infection spreads to your lungs from your nose, sinuses, or throat. A cough from a chest cold can last several weeks.

Antibiotics don’t work on viral infections. See the back page for treatments that may ease your symptoms and help you get well.

Why won't my doctor prescribe antibiotics?

Over 90% of cough illnesses — including acute bronchitis — are caused by viruses. Antibiotics only kill bacteria, not viruses, and do not help patients with acute bronchitis get better faster. When used appropriately, the benefits of antibiotics far outweigh the risks. However, if antibiotics are **NOT** needed, there are no benefits, only risks, including:

- **Antibiotic resistance.** This means that bacteria start to build resistance to antibiotics, so they no longer work when needed. You may then need more toxic and costly antibiotics or you may need to be treated in a hospital. Antibiotic resistance can even lead to death.
- **Side effects and allergic reactions.** Many antibiotics can cause side effects or allergic reactions. Since antibiotics don’t help you recover from bronchitis any faster, the benefits do not outweigh the risks.

How is bronchitis diagnosed?

Your doctor will pay attention to your symptoms to diagnose acute bronchitis and rule out other conditions such as pneumonia, pertussis (whooping cough), or other bacterial infections. Your doctor will also listen to your chest as you breathe, and may order a chest x-ray, lung function test, or nose or throat culture.

How is it treated?

Treatment for bronchitis usually includes the following:

- **Medication.** Because most bronchitis is caused by a virus, not a bacteria, antibiotics rarely help. But your doctor may suggest other medications to help with your symptoms. For example:
 - Ibuprofen or acetaminophen can help lower your fever and ease aches and pains.
 - Some prescription or over-the-counter cough medicines may help control your cough.
- **Rest.** You'll need a lot of rest and sleep to help your body heal.
- **Extra fluids.** Drink plenty of water or other beverages every day. The extra fluid helps your body clear your lungs.
- **Vaporizer, humidifier, or steam from hot water.** Adding moisture to the air can help clear your lungs.
- **Avoidance of smoke as well as other irritants** in the air (dust, pollution, chemicals, etc.).

How can I prevent it?

You can help prevent bronchitis by:

- Washing your hands often
- Getting the vaccines recommended by your doctor
- Getting plenty of rest
- Eating a healthy, balanced diet
- Quitting smoking, if you smoke

When should I call the doctor?

To speed your recovery from bronchitis, follow your doctor's instructions. Pay attention to your symptoms as well. Call your doctor if you notice any of the following:

- Fever over 100° F with chills — especially if it lasts more than 24 hours
- Coughing up blood
- Difficulty breathing
- Swollen feet
- No improvement — or a worsening of your symptoms — after 10 to 14 days from the start of your illness
- Cough lasting more than 3 weeks total