

Acute Bronchitis

What is acute bronchitis?

Acute bronchitis (say: brawn-KY-tiss) is a common cause of cough. Swelling and redness in the large tubes of the lungs (bronchial tubes) lead to coughing, shortness of breath, wheezing, chest pain, and fever. The cough can last for three weeks or more.

What causes it?

Acute bronchitis is almost always caused by a virus. The same viruses that cause colds can also cause acute bronchitis. You can think of acute bronchitis as a “chest cold.”

What is the treatment for acute bronchitis?

Antibiotics are usually not helpful because they don't work against viruses. But, let your doctor know if you were exposed to someone with pertussis (whooping cough) because antibiotics may be helpful for that infection. Otherwise, antibiotics are rarely needed for coughing.

With time, your body can usually get rid of the infection on its own. There are medicines that can make you feel better. Your doctor might recommend ibuprofen or acetaminophen for fever, or other over-the-counter medicines for cough, mucus production, or wheezing.

Over-the-counter cough medicines should not be used in children younger than four years because they can be harmful. Honey may be helpful for coughing in children older than one year.

When should I call my doctor?

You should call your doctor if you are short of breath, have a persistent high fever, have chills and sweats, or begin coughing up bloody or rust-colored phlegm.

How do I prevent acute bronchitis?

Wash your hands often, especially during the winter when this illness is more common. Don't use tobacco. If you smoke, quitting can help keep you from getting a more severe infection.

Where can I get more information?

Your doctor

AAFP's Patient Education Resource

<http://familydoctor.org/familydoctor/en/diseases-conditions/acute-bronchitis.html>

National Library of Medicine

<https://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/acutebronchitis.html>

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This handout is provided to you by your family doctor and the American Academy of Family Physicians. Other health-related information is available from the AAFP online at <http://familydoctor.org>.

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