

# What Is Bronchitis?

Bronchitis (bron-KI-tis) is a condition in which the bronchial tubes become inflamed. These tubes carry air to your lungs. (For more information about the bronchial tubes and airways, go to the Diseases and Conditions Index [How the Lungs Work](#) article.)

People who have bronchitis often have a cough that brings up mucus. Mucus is a slimy substance made by the lining of the bronchial tubes. Bronchitis also may cause wheezing (a whistling or squeaky sound when you breathe), chest pain or discomfort, a low fever, and shortness of breath.

## **Overview**

The two main types of bronchitis are acute (short term) and chronic (ongoing).

### ***Acute Bronchitis***

Infections or lung irritants cause acute bronchitis. The same viruses that cause colds and the flu are the most common cause of acute bronchitis. These viruses are spread through the air when people cough. They also are spread through physical contact (for example, on hands that have not been washed).

Sometimes bacteria cause acute bronchitis.

Acute bronchitis lasts from a few days to 10 days. However, coughing may last for several weeks after the infection is gone.

Several factors increase your risk for acute bronchitis. Examples include exposure to tobacco smoke (including secondhand smoke), dust, fumes, vapors, and air pollution. Avoiding these lung irritants as much as possible can help lower your risk for acute bronchitis.

Most cases of acute bronchitis go away within a few days. If you think you have acute bronchitis, see your doctor. He or she will want to rule out other, more serious health conditions that require medical care.

## ***Chronic Bronchitis***

Chronic bronchitis is an ongoing, serious condition. It occurs if the lining of the bronchial tubes is constantly irritated and inflamed, causing a long-term cough with mucus. Smoking is the main cause of chronic bronchitis.

Viruses or bacteria can easily infect the irritated bronchial tubes. If this happens, the condition worsens and lasts longer. As a result, people who have chronic bronchitis have periods when symptoms get much worse than usual.

Chronic bronchitis is a serious, long-term medical condition. Early diagnosis and treatment, combined with quitting smoking and avoiding secondhand smoke, can improve quality of life. The chance of complete recovery is low for people who have severe chronic bronchitis.

## **Other Names for Bronchitis**

Bronchitis

Chronic bronchitis

Industrial bronchitis

## **What Causes Bronchitis?**

- **Acute Bronchitis**
- Infections or lung irritants cause acute bronchitis. The same viruses that cause colds and the flu are the most common cause of acute bronchitis. Sometimes bacteria can cause the condition.
- Certain substances can irritate your lungs and airways and raise your risk for acute bronchitis. For example, inhaling or being exposed to tobacco smoke, dust, fumes, vapors, or air pollution raises your risk for the condition. These lung irritants also can make symptoms worse.
- Being exposed to a high level of dust or fumes, such as from an explosion or a big fire, also may lead to acute bronchitis.
- **Chronic Bronchitis**

- Repeatedly breathing in fumes that irritate and damage lung and airway tissues causes chronic bronchitis. Smoking is the major cause of the condition.
- Breathing in air pollution and dust or fumes from the environment or workplace also can lead to chronic bronchitis.
- People who have chronic bronchitis go through periods when symptoms become much worse than usual. During these times, they also may have acute viral or bacterial bronchitis.

## Who Is at Risk for Bronchitis?

- Bronchitis is a very common condition. Millions of cases occur every year.
- Elderly people, infants, and young children are at higher risk for acute bronchitis than people in other age groups.
- People of all ages can develop chronic bronchitis, but it occurs more often in people who are older than 45. Also, many adults who develop chronic bronchitis are smokers. Women are more than twice as likely as men to be diagnosed with chronic bronchitis.
- Smoking and having an existing lung disease greatly increase your risk for bronchitis. Contact with dust, chemical fumes, and vapors from certain jobs also increases your risk for the condition. Examples include jobs in coal mining, textile manufacturing, grain handling, and livestock farming.
- Air pollution, infections, and allergies can worsen the symptoms of chronic bronchitis, especially if you smoke.

## What Are the Signs and Symptoms of Bronchitis?

- **Acute Bronchitis**
- Acute bronchitis caused by an infection usually develops after you already have a cold or the flu. Symptoms of a cold or the flu include sore throat, fatigue (tiredness), fever, body aches, stuffy or runny nose, vomiting, and diarrhea.
- The main symptom of acute bronchitis is a persistent cough, which may last 10 to 20 days. The cough may produce clear mucus (a slimy substance). If the mucus is yellow or green, you may have a bacterial infection as well. Even after the infection clears up, you may still have a dry cough for days or weeks.

- Other symptoms of acute bronchitis include wheezing (a whistling or squeaky sound when you breathe), low fever, and chest tightness or pain.
- If your acute bronchitis is severe, you also may have shortness of breath, especially with physical activity.
- **Chronic Bronchitis**
- The signs and symptoms of chronic bronchitis include coughing, wheezing, and chest discomfort. The coughing may produce large amounts of mucus. This type of cough often is called a smoker's cough.

## How Is Bronchitis Diagnosed?

Your doctor usually will diagnose bronchitis based on your signs and symptoms. He or she may ask questions about your cough, such as how long you've had it, what you're coughing up, and how much you cough.

Your doctor also will likely ask:

About your medical history

Whether you've recently had a cold or the flu

Whether you smoke or spend time around others who smoke

Whether you've been exposed to dust, fumes, vapors, or air pollution

Your doctor will use a stethoscope to listen for wheezing (a whistling or squeaky sound when you breathe) or other abnormal sounds in your lungs. He or she also may:

Look at your mucus to see whether you have a bacterial infection

Test the oxygen levels in your blood using a sensor attached to your fingertip or toe

Recommend a chest x ray, lung function tests, or blood tests

# How Is Bronchitis Treated?

- The main goals of treating acute and chronic bronchitis are to relieve symptoms and make breathing easier.
- If you have acute bronchitis, your doctor may recommend rest, plenty of fluids, and aspirin (for adults) or acetaminophen to treat fever.
- Antibiotics usually aren't prescribed for acute bronchitis. This is because they don't work against viruses—the most common cause of acute bronchitis. However, if your doctor thinks you have a bacterial infection, he or she may prescribe antibiotics.
- A humidifier or steam can help loosen mucus and relieve wheezing and limited air flow. If your bronchitis causes wheezing, you may need an inhaled medicine to open your airways. You take this medicine using an inhaler. This device allows the medicine to go straight to your lungs.
- Your doctor also may prescribe medicines to relieve or reduce your cough and treat your inflamed airways (especially if your cough persists).
- If you have chronic bronchitis and also have been diagnosed with COPD (chronic obstructive pulmonary disease), you may need medicines to open your airways and help clear away mucus. These medicines include bronchodilators (inhaled) and steroids (inhaled or pill form).
- If you have chronic bronchitis, your doctor may prescribe oxygen therapy. This treatment can help you breathe easier, and it provides your body with needed oxygen.
- One of the best ways to treat acute and chronic bronchitis is to remove the source of irritation and damage to your lungs. If you smoke, it's very important to quit.
- Talk with your doctor about programs and products that can help you quit smoking. Try to avoid secondhand smoke and other lung irritants, such as dust, fumes, vapors, and air pollution.
- For more information about how to quit smoking, go to the Diseases and Conditions Index Smoking and Your Heart article and the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute's "Your Guide to a Healthy Heart." Although these resources focus on heart health, they include general information about how to quit smoking.

# How Can Bronchitis Be Prevented?

- You can't always prevent acute or chronic bronchitis. However, you can take steps to lower your risk for both conditions. The most important step is to quit smoking or not start smoking.
- For more information about how to quit smoking, go to the Diseases and Conditions Index [Smoking and Your Heart](#) article and the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute's "[Your Guide to a Healthy Heart](#)." Although these resources focus on heart health, they include general information about how to quit smoking.
- Also, try to avoid other lung irritants, such as secondhand smoke, dust, fumes, vapors, and air pollution. For example, wear a mask over your mouth and nose when you use paint, paint remover, varnish, or other substances with strong fumes. This will help protect your lungs.
- Wash your hands often to limit your exposure to germs and bacteria. Your doctor also may advise you to get a yearly flu shot and a [pneumonia](#) vaccine.