

# Acute bronchitis

## What is bronchitis?

Bronchitis is inflammation of the lining of the bronchial tree (air passages) of the lungs. The inflammation affects the trachea, large bronchial tubes (bronchi) and the smaller bronchial tubes (bronchioli).

Acute bronchitis refers to the sudden onset of this inflammation while the term chronic bronchitis refers to the more serious, long-term condition which is often caused by smoking.

## What is the cause?

Acute bronchitis is almost always caused by one of the many common respiratory viruses.

Most cases begin with an upper respiratory infection, such as the common cold. The infection involves not only the nose and throat, but also the lower part of the respiratory tract, including the trachea and bronchial tubes.

Another cause is inflammation from breathing air that contains air-borne pollutants, such as chemical fumes, dust and smoke, which irritate the bronchial tree.

## What are the symptoms?

The main symptom is an irritating cough that produces little or no sputum initially but later may bring up greyish or yellowish sputum called phlegm.

Other symptoms include:

- Wheezing.
- Breathlessness.
- Fever.
- Discomfort (a feeling of pressure) behind the sternum, made worse by coughing.

## How common is acute bronchitis and who gets it?

An occasional attack of acute bronchitis is common, although relatively rare, in fit, healthy people, especially those who live in an unpolluted, dry environment and don't smoke cigarettes.

The risk of getting acute bronchitis increases with:

- Smoking.
- Cold, humid weather.
- Areas of high atmospheric pollution.
- Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease.
- Congested lungs from heart failure.
- Recent illness.
- Certain ages — very young and old.

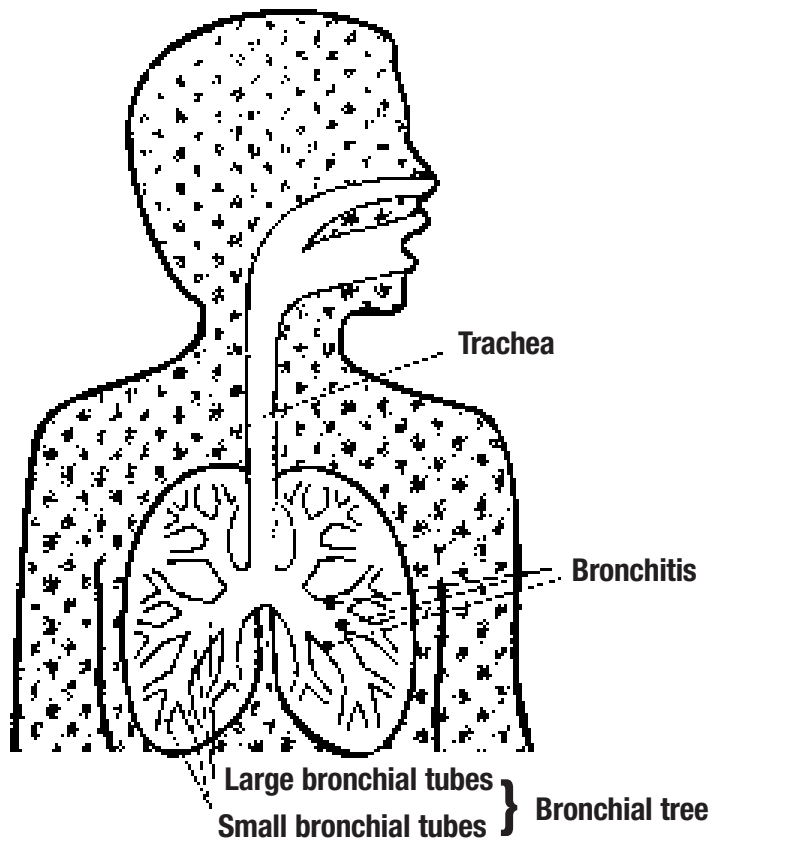
## What is the outcome?

Acute bronchitis usually improves spontaneously in at least 85% of patients and in 4-8 days in healthy people.

Sometimes, especially in those in the risk categories, the infection can be complicated by bacterial superinfection. These patients may get worse, developing increasingly severe symptoms.

## What are the risks?

There is no significant risk to the lungs if a healthy non-smoker has a single episode of acute bronchitis. However, it can be serious, especially in



debilitated people where complications such as persistent bronchitis or pneumonia can develop.

Recurrent episodes are a concern in those with an existing lung disorder such as pulmonary fibrosis. People who smoke can also develop chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, where symptoms become persistent.

## What is the treatment?

**Prescribing antibiotics:** Antibiotics are not needed for acute bronchitis because it is a viral infection which runs a natural course of recovery.

Antibiotics are reserved for patients whose illness may be complicated by a bacterial infection. Your doctor will diagnose this on clinical grounds, sometimes ordering a sputum culture.

**Self-help measures:** These include:

- Rest at home — not necessarily in bed. A warm, well-ven-

tilated room is best.

- Take aspirin or paracetamol (preferable) for fever or chest discomfort.
- Take an over-the-counter cough medicine (one that works for you) for a non-productive cough (without sputum).
- A heat pack or warm water bottle placed on the chest may relieve discomfort.
- Steam inhalations using a mentholated preparation in very hot water can clear your nasal and bronchial passages.

In some cases, your doctor may prescribe a bronchodilator administered by aerosol inhalation to relieve any wheezing.

Seek medical help if you have:

- Increased shortness of breath.
- High fever and chills.
- Chest pain.
- Discoloured and/or bloody sputum.
- Vomiting.
- Other serious symptoms.

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