



Bronchitis

MU Patient Education Series

Definition:

Bronchitis refers to the inflammation of the passage that carries air to and from your lungs. This condition can either be acute or chronic. An acute case of bronchitis is short-term, lasting only a few days, possibly leaving a cough behind. Chronic cases are more serious and consist of persistent, long-term inflammation which requires medical attention. Chronic bronchitis is one of the conditions included in COPD (chronic obstructive pulmonary disease).

CAUSES:

Acute bronchitis is generally caused by viruses. These viruses usually infect your nose, throat or sinus and then travel down to your lungs. The viruses are often the same viruses that cause conditions such as the flu or the common cold. Occasionally, a bacterial infection arises in the airways as well. Chronic bronchitis involves a constant mucous-filled cough for over three months. This condition tends to be caused by smoking cigarettes. Other factors such as air pollution, toxic gases and dust have also been linked to bronchitis.

WHO IS AT HIGH RISK FOR BRONCHITIS?

There are certain factors and conditions that make some individuals more prone to bronchitis. Such factors include:

- Smoking cigarettes
- Low immune system resistance—as previously mentioned, acute bronchitis can be caused by a cold or the flu
- Old or young age
- Lung or heart conditions
- Air pollution
- Infections
- Allergies
- Gaseous toxins



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- Certain dusts
- Occupations involving lung irritants such as dust, grains or textiles or areas that allow exposure to chemical fumes.

Avoiding these risk factors will help to keep your lungs healthy and bronchitis free!

COMPLICATIONS:

Bronchitis cases range from mild to severe. Some cases go away after a few days, but others persist and lead to other, more serious conditions. Complications with bronchitis can lead to conditions such as:

- Pneumonia
- Tuberculosis
- Cystic fibrosis
- Asthma
- Chronic bronchitis
- Sinusitis

If you take care of your bronchitis and follow your treatment plan, you will be on the right track to avoiding further complications. As with most diseases, bronchitis can be unexpected and may trigger unexpected complications, so remember to stay calm and keep your doctor updated!

SIGNS/SYMPTOMS:

The symptoms for acute and chronic bronchitis are very similar. The key difference is that acute bronchitis will wane after about a week, while chronic bronchitis will persist and recur. The symptoms include:

- Chest pain and discomfort
- Cough
- Mucous which can be clear, yellow, white, gray, or green
- Exhaustion
- Fever
- Shortness of breath
- Wheezing
- Chills

Even after the symptoms fade, you may experience a lingering cough for several weeks. If the cough persists longer than a few weeks, consult your physician.



DIAGNOSIS/TESTS:

At first, your symptoms may closely resemble those of the average cold. When you visit your physician, he or she will listen to your breathing and will likely hear abnormal noises. Your breathing will also likely be tested using a spirometer. A spirometer is used in a pulmonary function test and evaluates your breathing by measuring the amount of air your lungs can hold and how quickly you can get the air out of your lungs. Other tests such as x-rays or sputum cultures may be performed. A sputum culture checks for the existence of bacteria in your sputum when you cough. Your physician may also measure the oxygen level in your blood.

TREATMENT/CARE:

The goal of bronchitis treatment is to ease your breathing and alleviate your symptoms. Since antibiotics cannot combat conditions caused by viruses, it is likely that you will be told to follow a self-care treatment plan. However, your physician may prescribe an antibiotic if he or she suspects a bacterial infection. In most cases the symptoms of bronchitis will be relieved by caring for yourself at home. Some self-care techniques include:

- Resting
- Drinking lots of fluids
- Breathing in warm, moist air
- No smoking
- Over the counter pain medications to manage your symptoms
- Inhalers to reduce the inflammation in your airways
- Cough medicine
- Avoiding factors that irritate your lungs
- Try using a humidifier
- Antibiotics if a bacterial infection is suspected

If your bronchitis does not improve after following your treatment plan, contact your healthcare provider to learn what other available treatments may be beneficial to you..

PREVENTION:

There are several measures you can take to reduce your risk of acquiring bronchitis. The following are some suggestions on how to do so:

- Do not smoke cigarettes
- Wash your hands frequently
- Avoid individuals who are sick



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- Stay up to date with your vaccinations
- Reduce your exposure to lung irritants

CALL YOUR HEALTHCARE PROVIDER IF:

It is essential that you stay on top of your health and remain alert of your symptoms. Be sure to communicate with your physician and alert him or her of any changes in your condition. It is critical that if you or someone around you with bronchitis is experiencing the following symptoms that you call your healthcare provider immediately:

- Cough that persists for more than three weeks
- Cough accompanied by blood or discolored mucous
- Wheezing cough
- Causes shortness of breath
- Cough keeping you up at night
- High fever
- Chest pain

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