



Acute Bronchitis (A Chest Cold)

Bronchitis is when the airways leading to your lungs (trachea and bronchi) get inflamed and fill with mucus. You get a nagging cough as your body tries to get rid of the mucus. Your cough can last two or more weeks. Acute bronchitis is usually caused by a virus and goes away on its own. Chronic bronchitis never really goes away but can be managed.

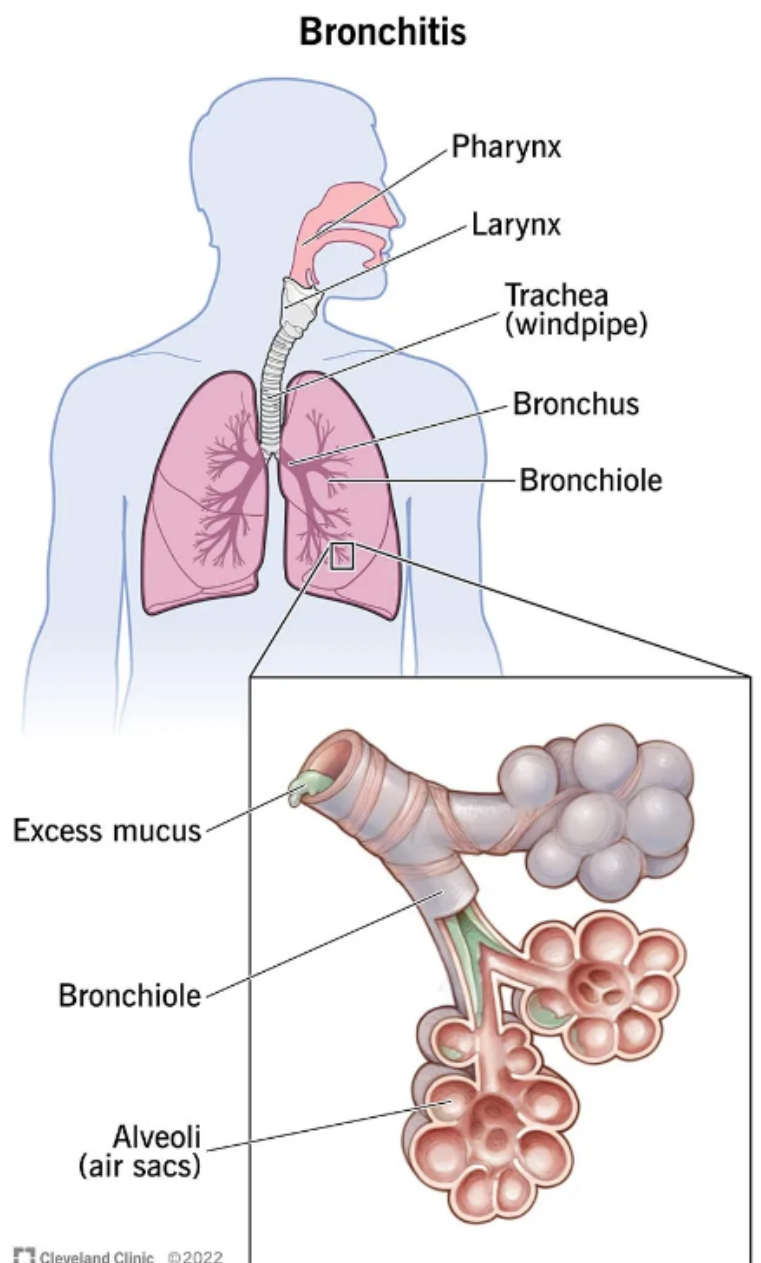
What is bronchitis?

Bronchitis is an inflammation of the airways leading into your lungs.

When your airways (trachea and bronchi) get irritated, they swell up and fill with mucus, causing you to cough. Your cough can last days to a couple of weeks. It's the main symptom of bronchitis.

Viruses are the most common cause of acute bronchitis. Smoke and other irritants can cause acute and chronic bronchitis.

Common colds turn into chest colds when the virus travels from your nose and throat to your lungs. Occasionally, bacteria cause chest colds.



What are the types of bronchitis?

When people talk about bronchitis, they usually mean acute bronchitis, a temporary condition that makes you cough. Some people get bronchitis so often that it's considered chronic bronchitis.

Acute bronchitis

Acute bronchitis is usually caused by a viral infection and goes away on its own in a few weeks. Most people don't need treatment for acute bronchitis.

Chronic bronchitis

You have chronic bronchitis if you have a cough with mucus most days of the month for three months out of the year. This goes on for at least two years.

If you have chronic bronchitis, you may have [chronic obstructive pulmonary disease \(COPD\)](#).

Who does bronchitis affect?

Anyone can get bronchitis, but you're at higher risk if you:

- Smoke or are around someone who does.
- Have asthma, COPD or other breathing conditions.
- Have GERD (chronic acid reflux).
- Have an autoimmune disorder or other illness that causes inflammation.
- Are around air pollutants (like smoke or chemicals).

How does bronchitis affect my body?

When your airways are irritated, your immune system causes them to swell up and fill with mucus. You cough to try to clear the mucus out. As long as there's mucus or inflammation in your airways, you'll keep coughing.

What are the symptoms of bronchitis?

A persistent cough that lasts one to three weeks is the main symptom of bronchitis. You usually bring up mucus when you cough with bronchitis, but you might get a dry cough instead. You might also hear a whistling or rattling sound when you breathe (wheezing).

You might have other symptoms, including:

- Shortness of breath (dyspnea).
- Fever.
- Runny nose.
- Tiredness (fatigue).

What causes bronchitis?

You almost always get bronchitis from a virus. However, nearly anything that irritates your airways can cause it. Infectious and non-infectious causes of bronchitis include:

- **Viruses.** Viruses that cause bronchitis include influenza (the flu), respiratory syncytial virus (RSV), adenovirus, rhinovirus (the common cold) and coronavirus.
- **Bacteria.** Bacteria that cause bronchitis include *Bordetella pertussis*, *Mycoplasma pneumonia* and *Chlamydia pneumonia*.
- **Pollution.**
- **Smoking cigarettes or marijuana (cannabis).**

How do you get bronchitis?

You get bronchitis when your airways swell up and fill with mucus. You can get the viruses and bacteria that cause bronchitis from close contact (shaking hands, hugging, touching the same surfaces) with someone who has them. You don't have to have bronchitis yourself to pass on a virus to someone else who ends up with bronchitis.

Other irritants, like tobacco or pollutants, are in the air you breathe.

Is bronchitis contagious?

Bronchitis itself — inflammation of your airways — isn't contagious, but the viruses and bacteria that can cause it are. For instance, if you're sick with the flu, you might get bronchitis too. But when your friend gets the flu from you, their airways don't get inflamed like yours did.

Is bronchitis a side effect of COVID-19?

You can get bronchitis with almost any virus, including SARS-CoV2, the virus that causes COVID-19. The symptoms of bronchitis can be like COVID-19, so make sure you get tested to know which one you have. There haven't been any studies that show that COVID-19 is any more likely to cause bronchitis than other viral illnesses.

What tests will be done to diagnose this condition?

There aren't any specific tests to diagnose bronchitis, but you might be tested for other conditions. Possible tests include:

- **Nasal swab.** Your healthcare provider may use a soft-tipped stick (swab) in your nose to test for viruses, like COVID-19 or the flu.
- **Chest X-ray.** If your cough lasts for a long time, you may get a chest X-ray to rule out more serious conditions. Your healthcare provider will use a machine to get pictures of your heart and lungs. They'll look for signs of other diseases that could cause your symptoms.
- **Blood tests.** Your provider may do blood tests, using a needle in your arm, to look for infections or check your overall health.
- **Sputum test.** Your provider may have you cough and then spit into a tube. Your sample will be tested for signs of a virus or bacteria.
- **Pulmonary function tests.** If your provider thinks you have chronic bronchitis, they may use a machine to test how well your lungs work.

How is bronchitis treated?

Acute bronchitis is usually not treated with medications. If you have the flu and your symptoms started within the past two days, your provider may prescribe antivirals to help it go away faster.

Since bronchitis is almost never caused by bacteria, antibiotics won't help you get better and might even make you feel worse.

What medications are used to treat bronchitis?

Your healthcare provider probably won't prescribe medications to treat your bronchitis. In some cases, you can use medications to help you with symptoms or to treat the underlying cause, including:

- **Antiviral medications.** If your bronchitis is caused by the flu, your healthcare provider might prescribe an antiviral medication. If you start taking antivirals quickly after your symptoms start, you might feel better sooner.
- **Bronchodilators.** Your provider might prescribe a bronchodilator (a drug that helps open your airways) if you're having trouble breathing.
- **Anti-inflammatory medications.** Your doctor might prescribe corticosteroids and other medications to reduce inflammation.
- **Cough suppressants.** Over-the-counter or prescription cough suppressants (antitussives) may help with a nagging cough.

- **Antibiotics.** It's very unlikely that you'll be treated with antibiotics for bronchitis, unless your healthcare provider thinks you have a bacterial infection.
- **COPD/asthma treatment.** If you have COPD or asthma, your provider may use additional medications or breathing treatments for chronic bronchitis.

Should I take antibiotics for bronchitis?

No, taking antibiotics won't help you get over bronchitis in most cases. Antibiotics are used to destroy bacteria that make you sick. Bronchitis is caused by a virus 95% of the time. Antibiotics don't help you get rid of a virus.

How do I manage the symptoms of bronchitis?

You can manage the symptoms of bronchitis at home with over-the-counter medicines and rest. Running a humidifier or taking warm showers can help loosen mucus and make breathing easier.

How long are you contagious if you have acute bronchitis?

Bronchitis itself isn't contagious, but some of its causes are. If your bronchitis is caused by a virus, you can be contagious for a few days to a week. If your bronchitis is caused by bacteria, you usually stop being contagious 24 hours after starting antibiotics. Other causes of bronchitis aren't contagious.

How can I reduce my risk of bronchitis?

The best way to reduce your risk of bronchitis is to avoid getting sick from viruses and other causes of lung irritation. Specific ways to reduce your risk include:

- Try to avoid being around other people if you or they may be sick. This is especially true in the winter months when people gather indoors.
- Avoid smoke and other irritants.
- If you have asthma or allergies, avoid any triggers (including pets, dust and pollen).
- Run a humidifier. Moist air is less likely to irritate your lungs.
- Get plenty of rest.
- Eat a healthy diet.
- Wash your hands often with soap and water. If you're not able to use soap and water, use a hand sanitizer that contains alcohol.
- Make sure you are up-to-date on flu and pneumonia vaccines.

What's the outlook for bronchitis?

Acute bronchitis usually isn't serious. While frustrating, you have to wait out the symptoms for a few weeks. If you're living with a heart condition or another breathing condition, like asthma, it could make your symptoms worse or last longer.

Chronic bronchitis can be a serious condition and might mean you have lung damage. While the damage can't be reversed, you can manage your symptoms.

Complications of bronchitis

If you have an ongoing condition like asthma, diabetes, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease or heart failure, bronchitis might make it worse (exacerbation).

Can bronchitis go away on its own?

Yes, acute bronchitis usually goes away on its own. It's almost always caused by a virus, and you can't get rid of most viruses with medicine. You can treat the symptoms at home while you wait for the inflammation to go down.

Bronchitis caused by something else may need treatment to help it go away. Chronic bronchitis usually doesn't go away completely but can get better with treatment.

How long does it take to get over bronchitis?

Most people get over bronchitis in about two weeks, but it might take as long as three to six weeks. You can manage your symptoms at home with over-the-counter medicines while you get better. If you don't feel better after three weeks, see your healthcare provider.

When should I see my Doctor about bronchitis?

If you have:

- A cough that lasts more than three weeks.
- A fever greater than 102° F.
- A fever that lasts more than five days.
- A cough that produces blood.
- Shortness of breath or wheezing.

What's the difference between bronchitis and pneumonia?

Bronchitis is an inflammation of the airways leading to the lungs. Pneumonia is an inflammation of the lungs themselves.

Bronchitis causes inflammation and mucus in your trachea and bronchi that make you cough a lot. Pneumonia causes inflammation and fluid in the small sacs in your lungs (alveoli) that makes it hard to breathe. You also usually have a cough and a fever. Pneumonia is more serious than bronchitis.

While you could have an infection that causes both, bronchitis doesn't usually turn into pneumonia.

What's the difference between bronchitis and bronchiolitis?

Bronchitis is inflammation in the larger airways (trachea and bronchi) coming into the lungs. Bronchiolitis is an inflammation of the next smaller airways (bronchioles) that come off of the bronchi. Children usually get bronchiolitis while adults get bronchitis.

Is menthol vapor rub good for bronchitis?

You might use vapor rubs, like Vicks VapoRub® for anything that ails you and wonder if they work for bronchitis. Vapor rubs have ingredients in them intended to calm down coughs, so they may help your bronchitis symptoms.