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Patient information: Acute bronchitis in adults (Beyond the Basics)

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BRONCHITIS OVERVIEW

Bronchitis develops when there is swelling and irritation of the bronchi, the large tubes that carry air to the lungs ([figure 1](#)). There are two types of bronchitis: acute (sudden onset) and chronic (long-standing).

Acute bronchitis often occurs with a viral infection, such as the common cold, and is sometimes called a "chest cold". The most common symptom of acute bronchitis is a nagging cough. Treatment of acute bronchitis usually involves treating the symptoms, such as sore throat and congestion. Antibiotics do not help to eliminate acute bronchitis caused by a virus. Antiviral agents are useful in some cases of acute bronchitis due to influenza, but there are no antiviral agents for other forms of viral bronchitis.

This article will review the causes, symptoms, diagnosis, and treatment of acute bronchitis. Articles that discuss the common cold and sore throat are also available. (See "[Patient information: The common cold in adults \(Beyond the Basics\)](#)" and "[Patient information: Sore throat in adults \(Beyond the Basics\)](#)".)

Chronic bronchitis is discussed separately. (See "[Patient information: Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease \(COPD\), including emphysema \(Beyond the Basics\)](#)".) More detailed information about acute bronchitis is available by subscription. (See "[Acute bronchitis in adults](#)".)

BRONCHITIS CAUSES

Most cases of bronchitis are caused by a viral infection of the upper airways, such as the common cold or the flu. Less commonly, a bacterium called *Bordetella pertussis*, which causes pertussis (whooping cough), is the cause. (See "[Whooping cough](#)" below.)

BRONCHITIS SYMPTOMS

The most common symptoms of acute bronchitis include:

- A persistent cough; this may last 10 to 20 days
- Some people cough up mucus, which may be clear, yellow, or green in color

Fever is not common in people with acute bronchitis. However, having a fever can be a sign of another condition, such as the flu or pneumonia. (See "[Patient information: Influenza symptoms and treatment \(Beyond the Basics\)](#)" and "[Patient information: Pneumonia in adults \(Beyond the Basics\)](#)".)

Conditions with similar features — There are other conditions that have symptoms similar to those of acute bronchitis.

- Chronic cough — A persistent cough that lasts more than eight weeks is considered a chronic cough, which is discussed in detail elsewhere. (See "[Patient information: Chronic cough in adults \(Beyond the Basics\)](#)".)
- Chronic bronchitis — Chronic bronchitis is defined as a cough that occurs on most days of the month for at least three months of the year during two consecutive years. This condition is discussed separately. (See "[Patient information: Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease \(COPD\), including emphysema \(Beyond the Basics\)](#)".)
- Pneumonia — Signs of pneumonia include fever and a fast heart and breathing rate. (See "[Patient information: Pneumonia in adults \(Beyond the Basics\)](#)".)
- Postnasal drip — Postnasal drip occurs when secretions drain from the sinuses into the throat. This can cause the throat to feel irritated, which causes you to feel like you need to clear your throat frequently. Postnasal drip can be caused by the common cold, allergies, sinusitis, or environmental irritants. (See "[Patient information: Allergic rhinitis \(seasonal allergies\) \(Beyond the Basics\)](#)".)

BRONCHITIS DIAGNOSIS

Most people who have a persistent cough after an upper respiratory infection (cold) do not need to see a healthcare provider. Diagnostic testing, such as x-rays, cultures, and blood tests, are not usually needed for people with acute bronchitis. However, testing may be recommended if your diagnosis is not clear based upon your examination or if another condition, such as pneumonia, is suspected.

When to seek help — You should call your healthcare provider if you have any of the following:

- Fever (temperature greater than 100.4° F or 38° C)
- A cough that lasts longer than 10 days
- Chest pain with coughing, difficulty breathing, or coughing up blood
- A barking cough that makes it hard to speak, especially if it persists
- Cough accompanied by unexplained weight loss

People who are older than 75 do not always have a fever or other concerning symptoms. If you are over 75 years and you have a persistent cough, you should call your clinician to determine if and when an office visit is recommended.

BRONCHITIS TREATMENT

Relief of symptoms — There is no specific treatment for bronchitis. There are a few treatments available for the common cold. (See "[Patient information: The common cold in adults \(Beyond the Basics\)](#)".)

- A nonsteroidal antiinflammatory drug (ibuprofen, naproxen), aspirin, or acetaminophen (Tylenol®) can help to relieve the pain of a sore throat or headache.
- Heated, humidified, air can improve symptoms of nasal congestion and runny nose, and has few to no side effects.

