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Acute Bronchitis

Overview

What is acute bronchitis?

Acute bronchitis is an infection of the bronchial (say: "brawn-kee-ull") tree. The bronchial tree is made up of the tubes that carry air into your lungs. When these tubes get infected, they swell and mucus (thick fluid) forms inside them. This makes it hard for you to breathe.

Acute bronchitis is bronchitis that lasts a short time (several weeks or less), while [chronic bronchitis](#) is bronchitis that is long-lasting or recurring (and is usually caused by constant irritation of the bronchial tree, such as from smoking).

Symptoms

What are the symptoms of acute bronchitis?

The symptoms of acute bronchitis can include:

- Sore throat
- Fever
- A cough that may bring up clear, yellow or green mucus
- Chest congestion
- Shortness of breath
- Wheezing
- Chills
- Body aches

You should call your doctor if:

- You continue to wheeze and cough for more than 2 weeks, especially at night when you lie down or when you are active.
- You continue to cough for more than 2 weeks and sometimes have a bad-tasting fluid come up into your mouth. This may mean you have gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD), which is a condition in which stomach acid gets into your esophagus (windpipe).
- You have a cough that produces blood, you feel very sick and weak, you have a high fever that doesn't go down and you are short of breath. You may have pneumonia.

How long will the cough from acute bronchitis last?

Sometimes the cough from acute bronchitis lasts for several weeks or months. Usually this happens because the bronchial tree is taking a long time to heal. However, a cough that doesn't go away may be a sign of another problem, such as asthma or pneumonia.

Causes & Risk Factors

What causes acute bronchitis?

Acute bronchitis is almost always caused by viruses that attack the lining of the bronchial tree and cause infection. As your body fights back against these viruses, more swelling occurs and more mucus is produced. It takes time for your body to kill the viruses and heal the damage to your bronchial tubes.

In most cases, the same viruses that cause colds cause acute bronchitis. Research has shown that bacterial infection is a much less common cause of bronchitis than doctors used to think. Very rarely, an infection caused by a fungus can cause acute bronchitis. Exposure to an irritant (such as smoke, dust or pollutants in the air) may cause bronchitis.

How do people get acute bronchitis?

The viruses that cause acute bronchitis are sprayed into the air or onto people's hands when they cough. You can get acute bronchitis if you breathe in these viruses. You can also get it if you touch a hand that has the virus on it and then touch your eyes, nose or mouth.

If you smoke or are around damaging fumes (such as those in certain kinds of factories), you are more likely to get acute bronchitis and to have it longer. This is because your bronchial tree is already damaged.

People who have gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD) can develop acute bronchitis when stomach acids get into the bronchial tree.

Treatment

How is acute bronchitis treated?

Most cases of acute bronchitis will go away on their own. It's a good idea to get plenty of rest, drink lots of noncaffeinated fluids (for example, water and fruit juices) and increase the humidity in your environment. Over-the-counter pain relievers can reduce inflammation, ease pain and lower fever. Nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory medicines (such as ibuprofen, naproxen and aspirin) help with pain and inflammation. Acetaminophen helps with pain and reducing fever.

It is okay to take an over-the-counter cough suppressant if your cough is dry (not producing any mucus). It's best not to suppress a cough that brings up mucus because this type of cough helps clear the mucus from your bronchial tree faster. Cough medicine is not recommended for children, especially those younger than 4 years of age.

Because acute bronchitis is usually caused by viruses, antibiotics do not help. Even if you cough up mucus that is colored or thick, antibiotics probably won't help you get better any faster. However, if your doctor thinks your bronchitis is caused by a bacteria, he or

she may prescribe antibiotics.

If you smoke, you should quit. This will help your bronchial tree heal faster.

Some people who have acute bronchitis need medicines that are usually used to treat asthma. If you hear yourself wheezing, this indicates you may need asthma medicines. These medicines can help open the bronchial tubes and clear out mucus. They are usually given with an inhaler. An inhaler sprays the medicine right into the bronchial tree. Your doctor will decide if this treatment is right for you.

Prevention

How can I keep from getting acute bronchitis again?

One of the best ways to keep from getting acute bronchitis is to wash your hands often to kill any viruses before they get into your body.

If you smoke, the best defense against acute bronchitis is to quit. Smoking damages your bronchial tree and makes it easier for viruses to cause infection. Smoking also slows down the healing process, so it takes longer for you to get well.

Questions to Ask Your Doctor

- How do you know what's causing my bronchitis?
- What prescription or over-the-counter medicines might help relieve my symptoms?
- Am I contagious?
- Am I at risk for pneumonia or other lung infections?
- What should I do if my cough doesn't respond to treatment or gets worse?

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