

Bronchitis is the inflammation of the main bronchial tubes of the lungs caused by a bacterial or viral infection.

What to look for

Acute bronchitis:

- initially a head cold, running nose, fever and chills,
- aching muscles
- back pain
- hacking cough.
- yellow, white, or green phlegm, usually appearing 24 to 48 hours after a cough.
- fever, chills.
- soreness and tightness in chest.
- some pain below breastbone during deep breathing.

Chronic Bronchitis:

- persistent cough producing yellow, white, or green phlegm (for at least three months of the year, and for more than two consecutive years).
- wheezing, some breathlessness.

Generally Bronchitis occurs more often in winter, in damp, cold climates and places that are heavily polluted. Bronchitis is an upper respiratory disease in which the mucous membrane in the lungs' upper bronchial passages becomes swollen.

As the irritated membrane swells and grows thicker, it narrows or shuts off the tiny airways in the lungs, resulting in coughing spells accompanied by thick phlegm and wheezing. The disease comes in two forms: acute and chronic.

Acute bronchitis is responsible for the hacking cough and phlegm that sometimes accompany an upper respiratory infection; in most cases the infection is viral in origin. If you are otherwise in good health, the mucous membrane will return to normal after you've recovered from the initial lung infection, which usually lasts for several days.

Like the lung disease emphysema, chronic bronchitis, is a serious long-term disorder that requires regular medical treatment.

If you are a smoker and come down with acute bronchitis, it will be difficult for you to recover since as you continue smoking, you do so much damage to the cells, known as cilia, to prevent them from working properly. This often leads to chronic bronchitis. If you smoke heavily the cilia can stop working altogether. Clogged with mucus, the lungs are then vulnerable to viral and bacterial infections, which over time distort and permanently damage the lungs' airways.

Acute bronchitis is very common .

Causes

Acute bronchitis is generally caused by lung infections; Chronic bronchitis may be caused by one or several factors. Repeated attacks of acute bronchitis, which weaken and irritate bronchial tubes over time, can result in chronic bronchitis. Industrial pollution is another culprit. But the chief cause is heavy, long-term cigarette smoking.

Traditional Treatment

Conventional treatment for both acute and chronic bronchitis may consist of antibiotics, aspirin and a cough syrup and a good deal of bedrest in a warm room. In severe cases of chronic bronchitis, supplemental oxygen may be necessary. Remember to drink lots of water.

If you have chronic bronchitis, your lungs are already damaged and the obstruction of the airways is not easily helped. Bronchodilator drugs may be given to relieve any such obstruction, as well as physiotherapy to help the patient get rid of any sputum. Oxygen therapy may be required as well.

Flu vaccinations are available against most strands of flu and pneumonia.

Do not take an over-the-counter cough suppressant to treat chronic bronchitis unless told to do so by your doctor. As the coughing assists in getting rid of any excess phlegm. In fact, your doctor may even prescribe an expectorant if your cough is relatively dry. Tell your doctor if you notice any changes in your phlegm.

The best course of action is to remove anything that irritates the condition. If you are overweight, your doctor may insist that you diet to avoid putting excessive strain on your heart.

If you smoke, your doctor will urge you to quit.

Alternative/Natural Treatments

A number of alternative therapies can be used to complement a conventional doctor's care. You must however continue to use conventional medical care.

Dietary Considerations

To strengthen the immune system and protect against infection, nutritionists often recommend vitamins A, B complex, C, and E, along with the minerals selenium and zinc. Some experts suggest that you also avoid mucus-producing foods, found mainly in the dairy group (although goat's milk generally causes less mucus production than cow's milk), as well as in refined starches (white- flour-based products) and processed foods.

For chronic bronchitis:

Avoid exposure to paint or exhaust fumes, dust, and people with colds. Consider using a vaporiser or inhaling steam over a sink full of hot water. Dress warmly in cold, dry weather.

When to seek further professional advice

- your cough is very persistent and severe, you may be causing damage to your lungs.
- changes in your mucus and your symptoms last longer than a week
- you display symptoms of acute bronchitis and have chronic lung or heart problems or are infected with the virus that causes AIDS
- you have great difficulty breathing.