

Bronchitis

Brown Health Services Patient Education Series

What is bronchitis?

Bronchitis is an inflammation of the bronchi (the air passages that extend from the windpipe into the lungs), generally caused by viral illness, and less commonly by other pathogens or irritants. Smokers more frequently get bronchitis than non-smokers. The cells that line the bronchi have tiny hairs (cilia) that trap and eliminate pollutants. When these cells become overly irritated, they stop functioning. Consequently, the air passages become clogged by debris, and irritation increases. In response, a heavy secretion of mucous develops, which causes the characteristic cough of bronchitis.

Brief bouts of acute bronchitis may evolve from a severe cold or flu, but may also begin without having had an infection, especially if you smoke. If you have underlying asthma, bronchitis may precipitate an asthma attack. Even if you have no history of asthma, bronchitis may trigger some asthma-like symptoms, such as wheezing and shortness of breath. Smoking is frequently associated with chronic bronchitis.

What are the symptoms of bronchitis?

Symptoms may include:

- a deep cough that produces yellowish or greenish phlegm
- pain behind the breastbone when you breathe deeply or cough
- wheezing
- breathlessness
- low-grade fever or chills
- headache
- sore muscles
- fatigue

What is the treatment for bronchitis?

- If you smoke, stop. If you are having trouble quitting, talk with your provider.
- Drink large amounts of fluids to loosen up chest mucus and move it out of your body.
- If your room is dry, try using a humidifier
- Try to get enough rest and sleep. Your body needs to rest to help fight the infection.
- There is debate among experts about the usefulness of cough suppressants and expectorants for cough that comes along with a cold. Generally, a wet productive cough that produces mucus clears secretions. If your cough disturbs your sleep, try a hot drink, elevate your head a little on the pillow and humidify your room.
- An OTC cough medicine with dextromethorphan (DM) (e.g. Robitussin DM or generic equivalent, per package directions) may help some people who have bothersome, dry, spasmodic cough.
- Guaifenesin (per package directions), an expectorant, is available either by itself or as a common ingredient in cough/cold OTC remedies. This product may help to thin and mobilize mucus. See your provider if your cough is worsening, keeping you up without relief, or associated with wheezing or shortness of breath. Other prescription medicines may be indicated.
- Take any prescribed medication as directed. Be aware that symptoms may last about 7-21 days.

Call Health Services (401)863-3953 if you:

- develop worsening symptoms
- have a high fever (100.4°F or higher)
- are too ill to care for yourself
- do not begin to improve within a few days