

Bronchitis

Overview

Bronchitis is a fairly common condition that often follows a cold or influenza (the flu). It occurs when the lining of the bronchi, which are the tubes that carry air to the lungs, becomes inflamed and irritated. This causes an irritating and persistent cough that in the early stages produces little or no phlegm.

As it progresses, the cough starts to produce mucus that can range in colour from yellowish to brown and green. Other symptoms include pain in the chest area (particularly when coughing), wheezing, fever and difficulty breathing. Symptoms can last up to three weeks, but the cough can linger for some time. This form of bronchitis is generally described as acute bronchitis.

Chronic bronchitis is a more serious condition, usually caused by smoking. People with chronic bronchitis have a cough with sputum most days for months at a time.

Bronchitis is generally not a significant condition, but it can be serious for some people, including the elderly, smokers and chronically ill people with heart or lung diseases. In some patients the infection can lead to more serious conditions such as pneumonia.

Causes

The most common cause of acute bronchitis is the common cold. Either the virus can spread down into the bronchi or the body, weakened by the virus, can pick up a secondary bacterial infection in the bronchi.

Other causes may include:

- ▶ Inhaling substances or air-borne pollutants that irritate the bronchial tree. These include dust, chemicals such as ammonia, and smoke.
- ▶ Lung conditions such as asthma, which may lead to more regular incidence of bronchitis.
- ▶ Chronic sinusitis, as the infection in the nose and throat can easily travel to the bronchi.
- ▶ Cold weather with high humidity.
- ▶ Having lowered immunity because of illnesses such as chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD).

Bronchitis is more common in winter and autumn—the traditional cold and flu seasons.

Symptoms

Acute coughing is the main symptom of bronchitis and usually comes on rapidly. The cough is initially dry, irritating and

persistent and then becomes moist, producing mucus that can range in colour from clear to yellow, brown and green.

Coughing can range from mild to severe, with some patients experiencing extended periods of uncontrollable coughing.

Other symptoms can include:

- ▶ Wheezing.
- ▶ Difficulty breathing.
- ▶ Aches and pains, particularly in the chest and back areas.
- ▶ Fever.
- ▶ Fatigue.
- ▶ A feeling of tightness around the chest.

Diagnosis

To diagnose bronchitis, the doctor will ask about symptoms and examine your ears, throat, glands and chest.

A chest x-ray may be ordered if a more serious infection is suspected, such as Pneumonia, or if the cough has persisted for 3 weeks or more.

A swab may also be taken from the throat to identify the type of infection. This may be important if the doctor suspects pertussis (Whooping cough) or Influenza. Confirmed pertussis is a reportable disease, meaning the doctor must notify the relevant health authority. This can help identify and prevent the spread of the disease, to minimise the scale of an outbreak within a community

Treatment

It is important to remember that not all bouts of bronchitis will respond to antibiotic treatment, as some are caused by viruses which cannot be treated with antibiotics.

Acute bronchitis gets better on its own and treatment is only required to relieve symptoms. This could include:

- ▶ Paracetamol, ibuprofen or aspirin for pain and fever. Do not give aspirin to children under 16 years of age. Use aspirin or ibuprofen with care if you have asthma or stomach conditions such as an ulcer.
- ▶ Rest. Getting plenty of rest will help the body recover. It is best to avoid other people while you are sick, both to prevent spread of the infection and to not exposing yourself to other infections at a time when your immunity is low.
- ▶ Cough medicines. Manufacturers claim these may help suppress an irritating dry cough or help break up mucous. However, there is little research that supports this. If you do take these it is important to take the right cough medicine for either a dry or 'productive cough' if that is what you have.

- ▶ A heat pack, placed on the chest, or a warm bath. This may help to loosen mucous and relieve pain.
- ▶ Steam inhalation. This will help to loosen and clear mucous. The water must be very hot, so beware of burns. Adding menthol-based products can help clear the nose as well.
- ▶ Puffers. If wheezing and breathing is a problem, your doctor may prescribe a medicine that helps open the airways (a bronchodilator). This is usually delivered into the lungs by aerosol spray, commonly known as a puffer.

Most people will recover from bronchitis without a visit to the doctor, but it is important to seek help if your symptoms worsen, particularly if coughing leads to vomiting, the mucus changes colour, you are short of breath or have chest pain, or you cough up blood.

Lifestyle and Diet

A healthy lifestyle is no guarantee against contracting bronchitis, but it will give you the best chance to recover in a relatively short period of time.

Maintaining a health weight, eating a diet rich in fresh fruit and vegetables, and getting plenty of exercise are all very important in achieving a healthy lifestyle.

As smoking increases the risk of acute bronchitis and can cause chronic bronchitis, it is best to quit and to avoid exposure to cigarette smoke from other smokers.

Other tips to prevent bronchitis include:

- ▶ Having the annual Influenza vaccine, particularly if you are chronically ill, work in the healthcare or childcare profession, or are elderly.
- ▶ Ensuring other vaccinations and boosters are up to date, such as pertussis and pneumococcal vaccines.
- ▶ Not smoking, and avoiding exposure to air pollutants.
- ▶ Avoiding things you are allergic to, such as dust, cats and dogs.

Support & online resources

Additional support and resources can be found at:

- ▶ The National Health and Medical Research Council www.nhmrc.gov.au
- ▶ The National Prescribing Service www.nps.org.au
- ▶ The Australian Lung Foundation www.lungfoundation.com.au