

BRONCHITIS, ACUTE

BASIC INFORMATION

DESCRIPTION

Inflammation of the air passages (trachea; bronchi; bronchioles) of the lungs. Acute bronchitis is of sudden onset and short duration (chronic bronchitis is persistent over a long period and recurring over several years).

FREQUENT SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS

- Cough that produces little or no sputum initially, but does later on.
- Low fever (usually less than 101° F or 38.3° C).
- Burning chest discomfort or feeling of pressure behind the breastbone.
- Wheezing or uncomfortable breathing (sometimes).

CAUSES

- Infection from one of many respiratory viruses. Most cases of acute bronchitis begin with a cold virus in the nose and throat that spreads to the airways. A secondary bacterial infection is common.
- Lung inflammation from breathing air that contains irritants, such as chemical fumes (ammonia), acid fumes, dust or smoke.

RISK INCREASES WITH

- Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD).
- Smoking.
- Cold, humid weather.
- Poor nutrition.
- Recent illness that has lowered resistance.
- Areas with high atmospheric pollution.
- Elderly and very young age groups.

PREVENTIVE MEASURES

- Avoid close contact with persons who have bronchitis.
- Don't smoke.
- If you work with chemicals, dust or other lung irritants, wear an appropriate face mask.

EXPECTED OUTCOMES

Usually curable with treatment in 1 week. Cases with complications are usually curable in 2 weeks with medication.

POSSIBLE COMPLICATIONS

- Bacterial lung infection (various kinds of pneumonia).
- Chronic bronchitis from recurrent episodes of acute bronchitis.
- Cough may persist for several weeks after initial improvement.
- Pleurisy (inflammation of the lining of the lungs) (rare).

TREATMENT

GENERAL MEASURES

- Diagnosis is usually based on the symptoms displayed, but a sputum culture may be done to check for bacterial infection.

- Treatment is directed toward relieving the symptoms, unless there are signs of secondary bacterial infection: green sputum, fever over 101° F or worsening symptoms.
- If you are a smoker, don't smoke during your illness. This delays recovery and makes complications more likely.

• Increase air moisture. Take frequent hot showers. Use a cool-mist, ultrasonic humidifier by your bed. Clean humidifier daily.

• Additional information available from the American Lung Association, 1740 Broadway, New York, NY 10019, (800) 586-4872.

MEDICATIONS

- For minor discomfort, you may use:

Acetaminophen to reduce fever.

Non-prescription cough suppressants. Use only if your cough is non-productive (without sputum). It may be dangerous to stop a cough entirely as this traps excess mucus and irritants in bronchial tubes, leading to pneumonia and poor oxygen exchange in the lungs.

- Other drugs that may be prescribed:

Antibiotics to fight bacterial infections.

Expectorants to thin mucus so it can be coughed up more easily.

Cough suppressants.

ACTIVITY

Rest in bed until temperature returns to normal. Then resume normal activity gradually as symptoms improve.

DIET

No special diet. Drink at least 8 to 10 glasses of fluid each day to help thin mucus secretions so they can be coughed up more easily.

NOTIFY OUR OFFICE IF

- You or a family member has symptoms of bronchitis.
- The following occur during the illness:
 - High fever and chills.
 - Chest pain.
 - Thickened, discolored or blood-streaked sputum.
 - Shortness of breath, even when the body is at rest.
 - Vomiting.

Adapted from Instructions for Patients, Sixth Edition, H. Winter Griffith, M.D., W.B Saunders Company