

What is acute bronchitis?

FACT SHEET prepared by The Asthma and Respiratory Foundation NZ

Acute bronchitis is an infection of the large bronchi (airways) in the lungs. The airways swell and thick mucus builds up inside them. It is often caused by the same viruses that cause the common cold. A minority of cases are caused by bacteria.

How do I know that I have acute bronchitis?

Acute bronchitis may accompany or closely follow a cold or influenza or may occur on its own. The major symptom of acute bronchitis is a productive cough that may bring up yellow or green sputum (phlegm). This cough can last several weeks. Some people may have shortness of breath and a wheeze. There may be other symptoms associated with the viral cause such as a runny nose, sore throat, fever, muscle aches and pains, sore eyes or headache, particularly early in the illness. Chest pain is not usually associated with bronchitis.

Who gets acute bronchitis?

Anyone can get acute bronchitis. It is more common in winter, especially during influenza outbreaks. Tobacco smoke and other air pollutants appear to worsen symptoms and may prolong the cough. People with a chronic lung disease can also get acute bronchitis, but may need different treatment.

How is acute bronchitis treated?

Most cases will go away after a few days or a week though the cough may linger for several weeks or months. This indicates that the airways are taking a longer time to heal.

As most cases of acute bronchitis are caused by virus's, antibiotics are usually not effective. Antibiotics should only be used if laboratory tests show that there are bacteria present in sputum (phlegm) samples.

Get plenty of rest and drink plenty of fluids.

Over the counter pain relief will help to ease the muscle aches and pains, the headache and reduce fever.

Cough suppressants can be taken if your cough is dry and at night if your sleep is disturbed. They are not advised if your cough is producing sputum.

Stopping smoking helps the airways heal faster. This is a good time to look at quitting completely.

Bronchodilators (relievers) are medicines used to open the airways in people with asthma and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD). They are sometimes used in acute bronchitis if you are wheezing.

When is a cough unlikely to be acute bronchitis?

Your doctor may suggest further tests if symptoms or signs are present which suggest an alternative diagnosis. These include a persistent or recurrent fever, especially with shivering (rigors), the presence of significant pain on breathing, coughing of blood, significant breathlessness or a cough lasting more than one month. Your doctor may also hear sounds on listening to the lungs that suggest an alternative diagnosis. Recurrent episodes of cough may

suggest asthma or chronic bronchitis. Prolonged coughing for over 4 weeks may be due to 'whooping cough' (pertussis infection).

Are there any tests for acute bronchitis?

There are no specific tests for acute bronchitis. However, your doctor maybe concerned that pneumonia is present and organise for a chest x-ray. Other tests may be performed if there is recurrent or prolonged cough. Sputum samples are not usually necessary unless another diagnosis is being considered.

How can I keep from getting acute bronchitis again?

As many cases of acute bronchitis follow on from the common cold or influenza the best way to stop the spread of these viruses is by: covering coughs and sneezes, regularly washing your hands and drying them thoroughly, avoiding contact with sick people and reducing time spend in crowded settings if there is a lot of colds or influenza in the community. Remember to have an annual influenza vaccine.

The Asthma and Respiratory Foundation NZ can help you

The Asthma and Respiratory Foundation NZ is New Zealand's not-for-profit sector authority on asthma and other respiratory illnesses. We advocate to government and raise awareness of respiratory illnesses, fund research for better treatments and educate on best practice.

Check out our comprehensive website at asthmaandrespiratory.org.nz