

What is Chronic Bronchitis?

FACT SHEET prepared by The Asthma and Respiratory Foundation NZ

Chronic Bronchitis is an inflammation of the airways in the lungs. The airways swell and thick mucus builds up inside them. This mucus plugs the airways and makes it hard for air to get into the lungs.

Chronic means that the condition lasts a long time. If you have a productive cough that occurs most days for at least three months of the year for two years in a row you may have Chronic Bronchitis. Chronic Bronchitis and emphysema are collectively called Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD).

How do I know that I have Chronic Bronchitis?

The most common symptoms of Chronic Bronchitis are a cough with mucus — often called a “productive cough”, shortness of breath and wheezing, which must be present for at least three months for two years in a row. Chronic Bronchitis may cause recurrent severe respiratory infections. These symptoms resemble other lung conditions or medical conditions so you need to be seen by your doctor for a diagnosis.

What causes Chronic Bronchitis?

Cigarette smoking is the most common cause of Chronic Bronchitis followed by bacterial or viral infections and environmental/occupational pollution.

How is Chronic Bronchitis diagnosed?

Your doctor will need to take a complete medical history and physical examination. You will probably be asked to take a spirometry test to see how well your lungs are working. Your doctor may also order a chest X-ray and blood and sputum tests. For further information on spirometry see the fact sheet “What is Spirometry?” or visit our website asthmaandrespiratory.org.nz

How is Chronic Bronchitis treated?

Stop smoking — this is the most important thing you can do if you have Chronic Bronchitis as it will prevent any further damage being done to your lungs. It is never too late to stop smoking

Try to avoid other things that can irritate your lungs such as aerosol products, dust or chemical fumes and things with strong fumes such as paint, paint remover, varnish

Physical activity is very important in helping you to keep well. It should be an important part of your day, even though you may get breathless during activity. By including

Physical activity in your day, your muscles, joints and circulation will become more efficient and your body will use oxygen better. It helps you take control of your condition

Pulmonary rehabilitation (rehab). A programme of education and exercise that usually runs for at least 6 weeks. Ask your doctor if there is a Pulmonary Rehab course in your area

Treatment may include the following medications:

- Bronchodilators (relievers) are medicines used to open the airways in people with asthma and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD). These medicines will help you breathe easier
- Oral corticosteroids (prednisone) may be used if you develop an acute worsening of your symptoms
- If you have recurrent acute episodes you may be started on a regular inhaled corticosteroid (preventer)
- Antibiotics will be prescribed if you develop an acute respiratory infection
- An annual flu vaccination is recommended if you have Chronic Bronchitis

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

For further information on COPD see the fact sheet "What is COPD", and our booklet "Breathe easier with COPD".