

What is bronchitis? — Bronchitis is an infection that causes a cough. It happens when the tubes that carry air into the lungs, called the "bronchi," get infected (figure 1).

Usually, bronchitis happens when a person gets a cold or the flu. The viruses that cause the cold or flu infect the bronchi and irritate them.

Bronchitis can also happen when a person gets an infection called "whooping cough," but this is not as common. Whooping cough is caused by bacteria that can infect the bronchi. Most people get vaccines that prevent whooping cough, but the vaccine doesn't always work. Sometimes, people still get the infection.

This article covers "acute" bronchitis. This is different from "chronic" bronchitis, which is an illness in smokers who have a long-lasting cough.

What are the symptoms of bronchitis? — The most common symptoms of bronchitis are:

- A nagging cough that can last up to a few weeks
 - Coughing up mucus that is clear, yellow, or green
- People with bronchitis do not usually get a fever.

When should I call the doctor or nurse? — Most people who have a cough that lasts longer than their other cold or flu symptoms do not need to see a doctor. The cough can take up to 3 weeks to get better, sometimes even longer. But you should call your doctor or nurse if you have:

- A fever higher than 100.4°F (38°C)
- Chest pain when you cough, trouble breathing, or coughing up blood
- A barking cough that makes it hard to talk
- A cough and weight loss that you cannot explain
- Symptoms that last longer than 4 weeks

Is there a test for bronchitis? — People do not usually need a test. But your doctor or nurse might do a test, such as a chest X-ray, if the cause of your cough isn't clear.

How is bronchitis treated? — Doctors do not usually treat bronchitis with antibiotic medicines. That's because bronchitis is usually caused by a virus, and antibiotics kill bacteria, not viruses. Antibiotics can actually cause other problems, too. So it's not a good idea to take them if you don't really need them.

To feel better, you can treat your cold and flu symptoms. Different treatments you can try include:

- Taking over-the-counter cough and cold medicines
- Breathing in warm, moist air, such as in the shower, over a kettle, or from a humidifier
- Taking a pain-relieving medicine if you have cold or flu symptoms like headache, muscle aches, or joint pain

How can I keep from getting bronchitis again? — You can reduce your chance of getting bronchitis again by keeping the germs that cause bronchitis out of your body. One of the best ways to do this is to wash your hands often with soap and water. If there is no sink nearby, you can use a hand gel with alcohol in it to clean your hands.

How can I keep from spreading my germs? — In addition to washing your hands often, you should cover your mouth with your elbow when you sneeze or cough. Using your elbow keeps you from getting germs on your hands. If you use a tissue, throw the tissue away and wash your hands.