

Patient education: Acute bronchitis (The Basics)

[Written by the doctors and editors at UpToDate](#)

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. But you should call your doctor or nurse if you have:

- A fever higher than 100.4°F (38°C)
- A cough that lasts longer than 10 days
- 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

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.

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

- Taking a pain-relieving medicine
- 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

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.

More on this topic

[Patient education: Cough, runny nose, and the common cold \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Flu \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Cough in adults \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Cough in children \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Acute bronchitis in adults \(Beyond the Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: The common cold in adults \(Beyond the Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Influenza symptoms and treatment \(Beyond the Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Chronic cough in adults \(Beyond the Basics\)](#)

All topics are updated as new evidence becomes available and our [peer review process](#) is complete.

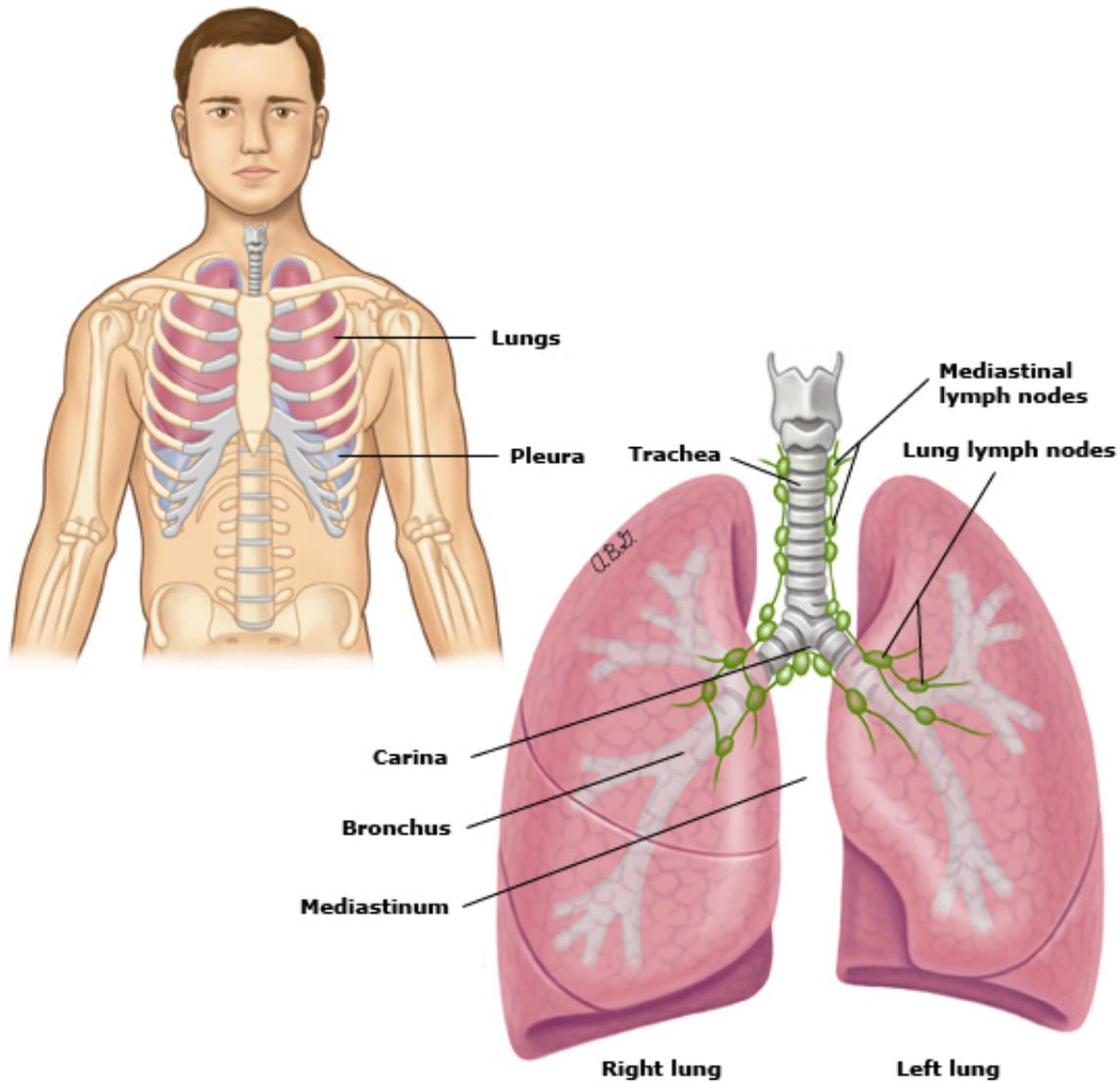
This topic retrieved from UpToDate on: Oct 20, 2016.

The content on the UpToDate website is not intended nor recommended as a substitute for medical advice, diagnosis, or treatment. Always seek the advice of your own physician or other qualified health care professional regarding any medical questions or conditions. The use of UpToDate content is governed by the [UpToDate Terms of Use](#). ©2016 UpToDate, Inc. All rights reserved.

Topic 15889 Version 9.0

GRAPHICS

Normal lungs



The lungs sit in the chest, inside the ribcage. They are covered with a thin membrane called the "pleura." The windpipe, or trachea, branches into two smaller airways called the left and right "bronchus." (The plural of bronchus is "bronchi.") The space between the lungs is called the "mediastinum." Lymph nodes are located within and around the lungs and mediastinum.

