

# AHRQ Safety Program for Telemedicine: Improving Antibiotic Use

## Acute Bronchitis or Acute Cough – Clinician Guide

### Diagnosis

- Acute bronchitis, or an acute cough, is generally caused by viruses.
- Lasts for up to 2-3 weeks.
- Presents with symptoms such as a cough that may persist; other symptoms may include rhinorrhea, sneezing, sinus congestion, sore throat, low-grade fever, headache, and fatigue.
- Occurs throughout the year.
- Sputum production does not distinguish a bacterial infection from a viral infection.
- History and physical examination should focus on identifying alternative diagnoses:
  - Potential bacterial diagnoses: bacterial pneumonia, etc.
  - Exacerbations of chronic medical conditions such as asthma, heart failure, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, etc.
  - Recurrent or chronic symptoms: allergic or seasonal rhinitis.

### Treatment<sup>1,2</sup>

- Antibiotics are not indicated for the treatment of acute bronchitis, or an acute cough.
- Patients should be advised to rest and stay hydrated.
- Consider the following treatments for symptom management:<sup>3-5</sup>
  - Analgesics (acetaminophen and nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs): Help reduce fever and pain in adults and children.
  - Dextromethorphan is a cough suppressant that may help, although there is limited data on its effectiveness.
    - Avoid in children under six, and is not advised in children ages 6-12.
  - Guaifenesin and combination antihistamine-decongestants may help with symptoms.
    - Avoid in children under six, and is not advised in children ages 6-12.
  - Honey can reduce cough in adults and children over the age of one year.<sup>6,7</sup>
    - Do not provide honey to infants under the age of one year.
  - Benzonatate may help, but do not prescribe to children under the age of 10.
  - Do not prescribe codeine to children under the age of 18.
  - Albuterol may help symptoms from acute cough if there is wheezing.<sup>8</sup>

### Prevention

- Viruses are spread by contact and droplets.
- To avoid transmission to others, encourage frequent hand washing, cough and sneeze into a tissue or into the arm rather than the hand, wear a face mask, and avoid touching the face.

### Followup

- The cough frequently lasts up to 3 weeks and sometimes even longer.<sup>9</sup>
- Patients should come in for an in-person evaluation if they do not feel better after 3 weeks, have a fever of over 102 degrees Fahrenheit, or develop a rash.
- Patients should go to the emergency department if they develop a high fever (above 102°F), trouble breathing, trouble swallowing, shortness of breath, confusion, a bad headache, or severe weakness.



## References

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