

AHRQ Safety Program for Telemedicine: Improving Antibiotic Use

Acute Cough (Bronchitis) – Patient Guide for Children and Adults

What is an acute cough or “bronchitis”?

- Bronchitis is also called an acute cough or a chest cold.
- Bronchitis or acute cough can be caused by many viruses.
- Even though bronchitis not caused by bacteria, bronchitis can still make people feel pretty miserable.
- Symptoms include a cough as well as a runny or stuffy nose, sneezing, a scratchy or sore throat, fever, muscle pain, and feeling very tired.
- Viruses that cause bronchitis spread in three ways: through the air, through contact with other people who have a virus, and on surfaces that have been touched by people with viruses.
- You can limit your chance of developing bronchitis by:
 - Washing your hands often with soap/water or hand sanitizer.
 - Avoiding close contact with people who are sick.
 - Wearing a mask when you are in crowds of people.
- You can limit the chance of spreading bronchitis by:
 - Washing your hands often with soap/water or hand sanitizer.
 - Coughing into a tissue or your elbow.
 - Wearing a mask when you are sick and around other people.
 - Staying home from work, school, or daycare, if feasible.



What should I do to feel better?

- You can't make the virus causing cough or bronchitis go away faster, but you can treat the symptoms. Some suggestions include:
 - Taking ibuprofen (commonly called Motrin® or Advil®) or acetaminophen (commonly called Tylenol®) for pain relief, unless your healthcare provider suggests not taking them. Store brands are just as good as name brands. Follow the instructions on the package.
 - To help a sore throat, gargle with water, take cough drops (wait until a child is at least 6 years old), swallow honey (do not give honey to children under 1 year of age), or drink warm tea.
 - Get plenty of rest, drink lots of water, and do not smoke.
 - Ask your healthcare provider about whether other medications might help you.

What is the role of antibiotics?

- Antibiotics can kill bacteria but not viruses.
- Antibiotics can have side effects like rashes, diarrhea, or yeast infections.
- Taking antibiotics will not help you feel better faster and might actually make you feel worse.

When will I feel better?

- Bronchitis can last for as long as three weeks, but people usually start feeling somewhat better around 10-14 days.

Contact your healthcare provider if:

- You do not feel better after 3 weeks.
- You have a fever of over 102 degrees Fahrenheit or develop a rash.
- Go to the emergency department if you develop trouble breathing, trouble swallowing, shortness of breath, confusion, a bad headache, or severe weakness, or other symptoms that concern you.

This document is intended to provide health-related information so that you may be better informed. It is not a substitute for your healthcare provider's medical advice and should not be relied upon for treatment for specific medical conditions.



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