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Chronic Bronchitis

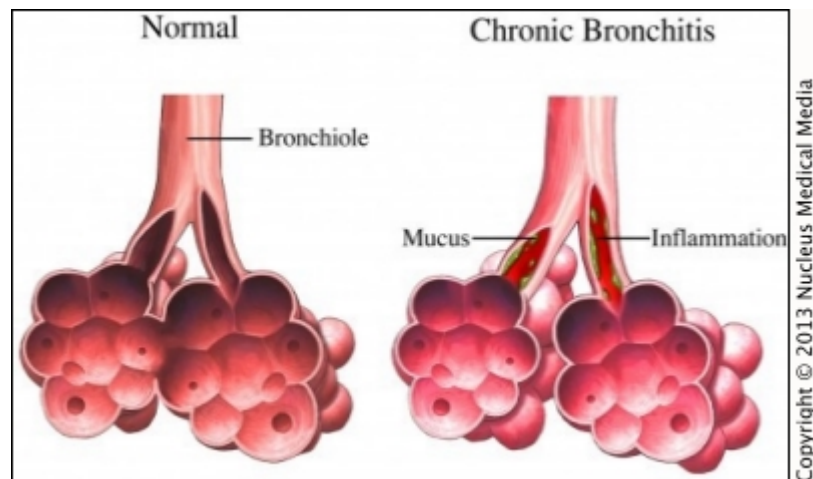
Overview

What is chronic bronchitis?

Bronchitis is an inflammation (or irritation) of the airways in the lungs. Airways are the tubes in your lungs that air passes through. They are also called bronchial tubes. When the airways are irritated, thick mucus forms in them. The mucus plugs up the airways and makes it hard for air to get into your lungs.

Bronchitis causes a cough that produces mucus (sometimes called sputum), trouble breathing and a feeling of tightness in your chest.

"Chronic" means that the condition last a long time. Chronic bronchitis is bronchitis that lasts longer than 3 months. Chronic bronchitis often occurs with emphysema, and together these diseases are called [chronic obstructive pulmonary disease \(COPD\)](#).



Causes & Risk Factors

What causes chronic bronchitis?

Cigarette smoking is the main cause of chronic bronchitis. When tobacco smoke is inhaled into the lungs, it irritates the airways and they produce mucus. People who have been exposed for a long time to other things that irritate their lungs, such as chemical fumes, dust and other substances, can also develop chronic bronchitis.

Diagnosis & Tests

How does my doctor know if I have chronic bronchitis?

Your doctor will ask you about your symptoms: Are you coughing up mucus? Are you having trouble breathing? Does your chest feel tight? How long have you had these symptoms? Do you smoke cigarettes? How many cigarettes do you smoke each day? How many years have you been smoking? Have you been breathing in other things that can irritate your lungs?

If your doctor thinks you have chronic bronchitis, you may be tested to find out if your lungs are damaged. You might have a pulmonary function test to see how well your lungs are working. During this test, you breathe into a machine that measures the amount of air in your lungs. Your doctor may also order blood tests and a chest X-ray.

Treatment

Can medicine treat chronic bronchitis?

Yes. Your doctor may prescribe a medicine called a bronchodilator to treat your chronic bronchitis. This medicine dilates (or opens) the airways in your lungs and helps you breathe better.

This medicine is usually inhaled (breathed in) rather than taken as a pill. An inhaler is the device used to get the medicine into your lungs. It's important to use your inhaler the right way, so you get the most from the medicine. Your doctor will show you how to use your inhaler.

If you have severe shortness of breath, your doctor may also prescribe medicine (such as theophylline) for you to take in pill form.

If your symptoms don't get better with these medicines, your doctor may prescribe steroids. You can take steroids either with an inhaler or in pill form.

Will antibiotics help chronic bronchitis?

In general, antibiotics cannot help chronic bronchitis. Antibiotics may be needed if you get a lung infection along with your chronic bronchitis. If you have a lung infection, you may cough up more mucus. This mucus might be yellow or dark green. You also may have a fever and your shortness of breath may get worse.

What about oxygen therapy?

Because of the damage from chronic bronchitis, your lungs may not be able to get enough oxygen into your body. Your doctor may prescribe oxygen if your chronic bronchitis is severe and medicine doesn't help you feel better. If your doctor prescribes oxygen for you, be sure to use it day and night to get the most benefit from it. Oxygen can help you breathe better and live longer.

What else can I do to help my lungs?

Exercising regularly can strengthen the muscles that help you breathe. Try to exercise at least 3 times a week. Start by exercising slowly and for just a little while. Then slowly increase the time you exercise each day and how fast you exercise. For example, you might begin exercising by walking slowly for 15 minutes 3 times a week. Then, as you get in better shape, you can increase your walking speed. You can also increase the length of time you walk to 20 minutes, then 25 minutes, then 30 minutes. Ask your doctor for help creating an exercise plan that's right for you.

An exercise program called pulmonary rehabilitation may help you improve your breathing. Pulmonary rehabilitation is often given by a respiratory therapist (a health care worker who knows about lung treatments). Your doctor may refer you to the pulmonary rehabilitation program at your local hospital.

A breathing method called "pursed-lip breathing" may also help you. To do this, you take a deep breath and then breathe out slowly through your mouth while you hold your lips as if you're going to kiss someone. Pursed-lip breathing slows down the fast breathing that often comes with chronic bronchitis. It may help you feel better.

Complications

What are possible complications of chronic bronchitis?

Chronic bronchitis increases your risk of lung infections, so be sure to get a flu shot every year. Also, get a pneumococcal vaccination every 5 to 6 years to protect against pneumonia.

A note about vaccines

Sometimes the amount of a certain vaccine cannot keep up with the number of people who need it. [More info...](#)

Prevention

What can I do to help my breathing and reduce my coughing?

If you smoke, the most important thing you can do is to stop. The more smoke you breathe in, the more it damages your lungs. If you stop smoking, you'll breathe better, you won't cough as much and your lungs will begin to heal. You'll also reduce your chance of getting lung cancer. Ask your doctor to help you stop smoking.

Try to avoid other things that can irritate your lungs, such as aerosol products like hairspray, spray deodorant and spray paint. Also avoid breathing in dust or chemical fumes. To protect your lungs, wear a mask over your nose and mouth if you are using paint, paint remover, varnish or anything else with strong fumes.

Questions to Ask Your Doctor

- How do you know what's causing my chronic bronchitis?
- What health risks are associated with chronic bronchitis?
- Am I at risk for emphysema or chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD)?
- What medicines will help relieve my symptoms?
- What lifestyle changes should I make at home to help relieve my symptoms?
- Is it safe for me to exercise? What kind of exercise should I do?
- What vaccines do I need?

Source

[Chronic Bronchitis: Primary Care Management](http://www.aafp.org/afp/980515ap/heath.html) by JM Heath, MD; R Mongia, MD (*American Family Physician* May 15, 1998, <http://www.aafp.org/afp/980515ap/heath.html>)

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