

Bronchiolitis

What is bronchiolitis?

Bronchiolitis is a chest infection that affects infants less than one year old. Infection is usually mild and most infants are back to normal within 7–10 days, although the cough can last for up to a month.

What causes it?

Bronchiolitis can be caused by a number of different viruses. The most common virus is respiratory syncytial virus (known as RSV). The infection is spread between people by coughing and sneezing.

Signs and symptoms

Bronchiolitis often starts with cold symptoms (runny nose, cough, sneezing and fever). The child will get sicker over the next few days.

Symptoms may include:

- fast or laboured breathing
- wheezing sound when breathing out
- trouble feeding (this is because babies only breathe through their nose)

Symptoms are often worse at night. Illness usually starts to improve after two to three days.

Infection may be worse and last for longer in very young children (under three months), premature babies or children with lung or heart problems.

How is it diagnosed?

A doctor can diagnose bronchiolitis by examining your child. Tests or X-rays are not needed.

What is the treatment?

No medicine can be taken to cure bronchiolitis.

Children's paracetamol (in recommended doses) may help your child feel more comfortable if they have a fever.

Infants with a severe infection may be admitted to hospital. In hospital, treatment may include oxygen and fluids. Fluids are usually given through a nasogastric tube (a tube that goes into the nose).

Care at home

- Make sure your child is getting enough fluids. Smaller feeds given more often may help.
- Salt water solution available from pharmacies (e.g. Fess) dropped or sprayed in each nostril before feeding may help clear the nose.
- Keep your child away from cigarette smoke.
- Prevent the spread of infection by keeping your child away from other small children especially for the first few days of illness.

When should I see a doctor?

See a doctor if your child has any of the following:

- feeding problems, especially if they have fewer wet nappies than usual
- difficulty breathing
- very sleepy, becomes pale or sweaty or begins to look blue in the skin
- pauses between breaths
- any other health problems that concern you.

In an emergency, always call 000 immediately. Otherwise, contact your local doctor or visit your nearest hospital emergency department. For non-urgent medical advice, call 13 HEALTH (13 43 25 84) to speak to a registered nurse 24 hours a day, seven days a week for the cost of a local call.

Things to remember

- Bronchiolitis is a chest infection that affects infants under one year of age.
- Infection is usually mild, and most infants will get better in about 7-10 days without any treatment.

