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Bronchiolitis

What is bronchiolitis?

Bronchiolitis is a common respiratory illness in infants and young children, usually less than 2 years of age, that causes the small airways of the lungs (the bronchioles) to become inflamed and swell. This hinders some airflow through the lungs making it hard for the child to breathe. It is common in infants because their airways are smaller and more easily blocked than in older children and adults. Adults and older children who come in contact with a child with bronchiolitis usually just develop cold symptoms. Bronchiolitis is not the same as bronchitis, which is a viral infection of the large upper airways and is more common in adults.

Bronchiolitis is caused by several viruses, such as respiratory syncytial virus (RSV), influenza, parainfluenza, and human metapneumovirus. This infection is more common from October through March. Other viruses can cause the symptoms of bronchiolitis as well.

What are the signs and symptoms of bronchiolitis?

Bronchiolitis usually starts out by looking like a common cold with runny nose, cough, and fever. Usually symptoms will progress and worsen in the first 3-5 days. These are some common symptoms in children that will let you know that they are having difficulty breathing:

- The child may wheeze, which is a high-pitched whistling noise when breathing out.
- The child may have trouble breastfeeding or drinking from a bottle or cup because of significant congestion or rapid breathing. It is important to look for signs of dehydration, such as dry mouth, decreased urine production, or crying without tears.
- When breathing in and out, the child may widen his nostrils and/or the child's muscles around and under the rib cage move in and out more, as the child is using extra muscles of the chest to get the air in and out of the lungs.
- You may hear persistent grunting and tightening of the stomach muscles.



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- The child's respiratory rate will be increased, even at rest.
- If the child is having much difficulty, you may notice a bluish tint around the lips and fingernails.

Children may become dehydrated if he/she cannot comfortably drink fluids. Signs of dehydration include:

- Drinking less than normal
- Dry mouth
- Crying without tears
- Urinating less than normal

Generally, the wheezing may last about 7 days and the cough usually is resolved by 2-3 weeks. The most common complication of bronchiolitis is an ear infection. Only 1-2% of children need to be hospitalized for this illness. Long term, approximately 10% of children who get bronchiolitis as young children will develop recurrences of wheezing with future viral infections.

What is the treatment if my child has bronchiolitis?

Bronchiolitis is caused by a virus, so antibiotics are not helpful because they are used to treat bacteria. There is no specific treatment for bronchiolitis, but there are ways to help your child be more comfortable with the symptoms.

Runny nose: The amount of runny nose with bronchiolitis is usually substantial. You can use infant saline nose drops (non-medicated) and a suction bulb every 2-3 hours as needed, particularly before feedings and bed. Place 1-2 drops of saline in each nostril, and then suction. Always point the end of the suction bulb to the outer parts of the nostril to help prevent irritation and nosebleeds.

Congestion: A cool mist humidifier may help to loosen mucus and can be used while the child is sleeping. Occasionally, you can also take the child into a steamy bathroom and that will help loosen sticky mucus, as well.



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Fever: You can help control a child's temperature with acetaminophen or ibuprofen (only use ibuprofen if your child is older than 6 months of age.) Follow the dosing recommended for the baby's age and weight. A fever sheet with recommended dosing can be found on our website.

Prevent dehydration: Please make sure to have the child drink plenty of fluids. Clear fluids such as water and Pedialyte may be tolerated better than milk or formula. It may be necessary to do smaller feedings more frequently to keep the child hydrated. The child may not have an appetite for solid foods and that is okay for a few days as long as they are taking in enough fluids to maintain hydration.

Some children need to be treated in the emergency room or hospital for their breathing problems or dehydration. They may require IV fluids, oxygen, deep suctioning, or extra medicine to help them breathe.

How can I prevent my baby from getting bronchiolitis?

Make sure everyone washes their hands before touching your baby and keep your child away from anyone who has symptoms of a cold or bronchiolitis. Remember that you should **never** expose your child to tobacco smoke, especially when they are sick.