

Bronchiolitis in children

What is bronchiolitis?

Bronchiolitis is a chest infection that is common in babies in the first year of life, particularly those under six months of age. It usually happens in winter. While most cases are mild, bronchiolitis can become serious in very young babies.

What causes bronchiolitis?

Bronchiolitis is caused by a virus. The virus attacks the small breathing tubes (*bronchioles*) of the lungs, which become blocked with sticky fluid (*mucous*).

What are the symptoms?

Bronchiolitis starts as a cold (with a runny nose, red eyes, sore throat and a fever). Then after a day or so, your baby may also develop:

- a cough
- wheezing (a high pitched noise or whistle when they breathe out)
- difficulty breathing
- difficulty feeding or sleeping.

Treatment

Bronchiolitis is often a mild illness that is best treated at home.

However a child with severe bronchiolitis may need to be observed in hospital. Treatment may include oxygen and sometimes special feeding.

Premature babies and those with existing heart or lung problems are at greater risk of becoming ill with this infection.

Bronchiolitis is a viral illness. **Antibiotics do not help.**

Home care

Most babies can be cared for at home if the illness is mild. Be guided by your doctor but there are some simple measures that may help recovery.

- Allow your baby to get plenty of rest. Keep your child at home while they are unwell.
- Your baby may not feed as well as normal. They may become tired while feeding, so offer smaller amounts of formula or water more often, or give more frequent but shorter breast feeds. This helps your baby to breathe better.
- If your baby has a fever and is miserable, you can give paracetamol (such as *Panadol* or *Dymadon*). Carefully check the label for the correct dose and give as instructed. Make sure you are not giving your child any other products containing paracetamol (such as some cough medicines and cold and flu preparations).
- Bronchiolitis can be passed on to other young children. Keep your child home from childcare and other places where there are young children.
- Do not smoke around your baby.

What to expect

The wheezing usually lasts two to five days. Your baby will slowly improve over a week to ten days. The cough can last up to a month.

Bronchiolitis usually happens only once, although some babies can have it again. There is no vaccine to prevent this illness.

Bronchiolitis and asthma

The symptoms of bronchiolitis and asthma are similar, but the two illnesses are quite different.

Most doctors do not diagnose asthma until a child is at least 12 months old, when the muscles around the airways have matured.

Some babies who have bronchiolitis may go on to develop asthma. Doctors do not know whether bronchiolitis has any role in causing asthma or whether children who develop asthma are simply more likely to get bronchiolitis as babies.

Asthma in children is usually mild and easily treated.



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Notes:

Seeking help



In a **medical emergency** go to the nearest hospital emergency department or call an ambulance (dial 000).

Such as when your baby is:

- breathing very hard or fast
- pale and/or lethargic
- not wanting to breast or bottle feed
- is less than 3 months of age
- not producing urine or has no wet nappies.



For other medical problems see your local doctor or health care professional.



For health advice from a Registered Nurse you can call **NURSE-ON-CALL 24 hours a day** on **1300 60 60 24** for the cost of a local call from anywhere in Victoria.*

NURSE-ON-CALL provides access to **interpreting services** for callers not confident with English. Call **1300 60 60 24**.

*Calls from mobile calls may be charged at a higher rate



Want to know more?

- Ask your local doctor or health care professional
- Visit the **Royal Children's Hospital** website www.rch.org.au/kidsinfo
- Visit the **Better Health Channel** www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au

If you would like to receive this publication in an **accessible format**, please phone 9096 8064 or email edfactsheets@dhs.vic.gov.au

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