

Bronchiolitis - Your Questions Answered

Information for Parents and Guardians

What is Bronchiolitis?

Bronchiolitis is a condition affecting the smallest air passages (bronchioles) in the lungs of babies and toddlers, usually under 24 months. The air passages become moist and inflamed, and this affects the baby's breathing. It is usually caused by a virus called Respiratory Syncytial Virus (RSV) but many other viruses can cause it too.

How do children get it?

The infection usually occurs in outbreaks during the winter months (November – March). When the virus is common in the community, older children who catch the virus usually only develop the mild symptoms of a cold.

What are the signs and symptoms?

Babies with bronchiolitis usually have a cough which may be harsh and dry at first, but soon becomes wet and fruity. The coughing may last for long periods of time up to several weeks. In addition to the cough, there is usually a runny nose, there may be a fever and your baby may have difficulty breathing. Breathing becomes rapid and seems to require more effort. Your baby may become too tired and breathless to breast or bottle feed because of this. Your baby may also vomit after feeding and the vomit may have mucous in it.

To confirm which virus infection your baby has some of the secretions from the back of your baby's nose will be tested either in the Emergency department or in the laboratory. This is usually only if they are being admitted to hospital.

How is it treated?

As the condition is caused by a virus, antibiotics are not effective. Asthma inhalers and steroids have no benefit either. Treatment is supportive until the body fights the virus off itself.

Babies with bronchiolitis need to rest. Feeds should be small and frequent, every 2-3 hours. Milk may be given by tube placed in your baby's nose and down into his or her stomach if they are admitted to hospital. Occasionally babies need fluid through a drip into their veins.

Some babies need oxygen to help them with their breathing. This may be given via little tubes directly into the nostril. Some need regular suction of the mucous out of their noses. You will be able to stay with your baby while they are in hospital and participate in their care.

How long does it last?

The period of breathlessness and poor feeding peaks at between days three-five, and may last for 7-10 days; but the cough may continue for several weeks particularly at night.

Is it infectious?

The viruses that cause bronchiolitis are very infectious as they spread in droplets when people cough and sneeze, but basic hand washing and looking after your baby in a cubicle will prevent it spreading to other babies.

Older children and adults can catch it, but usually only as a mild cough or cold.

Can my child catch bronchiolitis again?

Although your child could get a second infection, it is very unlikely that the symptoms will be as severe as the first time. Some babies who get bronchiolitis early in life are more prone to being wheezy with viruses in early childhood.

What can I do?

In hospital you can help by being involved in your baby's care – the nurses will be happy to show you what to do if you wish. Don't be afraid to ask them questions if your baby is very poorly – they are there to help you, and will give you the support and comfort you need at a stressful time.

What happens when I take my baby home?

If you are discharged home then offer your baby small, frequent breast or bottle feeds and expect them to need lots of rest. Coughing will interrupt their sleep. Paracetamol syrup may be given according to the bottle instructions if they have a fever.

Your baby may still have a cough and runny nose, and although feeding may not be quite back to normal, he or she will be taking enough to meet their needs. Your health visitor and GP will be told about your baby's condition.

If you think your baby is taking less than half their usual feed volume or are vomiting most of their milk then you should bring them back. If they are breathing very rapidly or seem unwell then again seek medical attention.

Smoking increases the chance of infants developing severe bronchiolitis and being wheezy later in childhood.

Royal Hospital for Children and Young People
50 Little France Crescent
Edinburgh EH16 4TJ
Tel.: **0131 536 1000**

Bronchiolitis – Your Questions Answered
Information for Parents and Guardians