

# Chest infection

A chest infection is an infection of the lungs or large airways. Some chest infections are mild and clear up on their own. Others can be severe and life-threatening.

## Symptoms

Chest infections often follow colds or flu.

The main symptoms are:

- chesty cough – coughing up green or yellow mucus
- wheezing and shortness of breath
- high temperature (fever) of 38 degrees Celsius or above
- headache
- aching muscles
- tiredness

These symptoms can be unpleasant, but they usually get better on their own in around 7 to 10 days. The cough and mucus can last for up to 3 weeks.

### Call your GP if:

- high temperature
- new, continuous cough
- loss of smell or taste

These are symptoms of COVID-19.

[Get advice about COVID-19 symptoms and what to do](#)

## Treatment

If you have a chest infection:

## Do

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- ✓ get plenty of rest
- ✓ drink lots of water to loosen the mucus and make it easier to cough up
- ✓ use painkillers to bring down a fever and ease headaches and muscle pain
- ✓ raise your head up while sleeping - use extra pillows to make breathing easier and clear your chest of mucus
- ✓ drink a hot lemon and honey drink to relieve a sore throat

## Don't

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- ✗ do not let children breathe in steam from a bowl of hot water because of the risk of scalding
- ✗ do not give aspirin to children under 16
- ✗ do not smoke – it can make your symptoms worse

## Pharmacists can help

Your pharmacist may suggest decongestant treatment. This can help loosen the mucus in your lungs so it's easier to cough up.

Coughing up the mucus helps clear the infection from your lungs.

## Talk to your GP if:

you have a chest infection and you:

- feel very unwell or your symptoms get worse
- cough up blood or blood-stained mucus
- have a cough for more than 3 weeks
- are pregnant
- are over 65
- have a weak immune system – for example, if you have diabetes or you're having chemotherapy
- have a long-term health condition, such as a heart or lung condition

If your symptoms are severe you may have pneumonia.

## Treatment from your GP

Treatment will depend on what caused your chest infection. It may be caused by a virus or bacteria.

### Viral chest infections

Many chest infections are caused by a virus. This usually clears up by itself after a few weeks. Antibiotics will not help a viral chest infection.

### Bacterial chest infections

Some chest infections are caused by bacteria. Your GP may prescribe a course of antibiotics. Make sure you complete the whole course, even if you start to feel better.

See your GP if your symptoms persist, or you still feel unwell after a course of antibiotics.

### Antibiotics

Antibiotics are only used to treat bacterial chest infections. They're not used for treating viral chest infections, like flu or viral bronchitis. This is because they do not work for this type of infection.

## How to avoid getting a chest infection

Stop smoking if you smoke. People who smoke have a higher risk of developing serious chest infections. Smoking damages your lungs and weakens your defences against infection.

[Get help to quit smoking](#)

Cut down on how much alcohol you drink. Excessive and prolonged alcohol misuse can weaken your lungs' natural defences against infections. This can make you more vulnerable to chest infections.

[Cutting down on alcohol](#)

Washing your hands, especially before eating, protects you from infections such as chest infections. Avoid touching your face with your hands.

[How to clean your hands](#)

If you're over 65 or have a serious long-term health condition, ask:

- your GP about [the annual flu vaccination](#)
- if you should have [the pneumococcal vaccine](#) – this helps prevent pneumonia

## How to avoid passing on a chest infection

To avoid passing on chest infections to others, you should:

- wash your hands often with warm water and soap
- cough into your elbow to stop germs from getting onto your hands and spreading to other people
- use tissues to trap germs when you cough or sneeze
- bin all used tissues as quickly as possible

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