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Chronic Bronchitis

What is chronic bronchitis?

Chronic bronchitis is a type of COPD [<https://medlineplus.gov/copd.html>] (chronic obstructive pulmonary disease). COPD is a group of lung diseases that make it hard to breathe and get worse over time. The other main type of COPD is emphysema [<https://medlineplus.gov/emphysema.html>] . Most people with COPD have both emphysema and chronic bronchitis, but how severe each type is can be different from person to person.

Chronic bronchitis is inflammation (swelling) and irritation of the bronchial tubes. These tubes are the airways that carry air to and from the air sacs in your lungs. The irritation of the tubes causes mucus to build up. This mucus and the swelling of the tubes make it harder for your lungs to move oxygen in and carbon dioxide out of your body.

What causes chronic bronchitis?

The cause of chronic bronchitis is usually long-term exposure to irritants that damage your lungs and airways. In the United States, cigarette smoke [<https://medlineplus.gov/smoking.html>] is the main cause. Pipe, cigar, and other types of tobacco smoke can also cause chronic bronchitis, especially if you inhale them.

Exposure to other inhaled irritants can contribute to chronic bronchitis. These include **secondhand smoke** [<https://medlineplus.gov/secondhandsmoke.html>] , air pollution [<https://medlineplus.gov/airpollution.html>] , and chemical fumes or dusts from the environment or workplace.

Rarely, a genetic condition called alpha-1 antitrypsin deficiency [<https://medlineplus.gov/alpha1antitrypsindeficiency.html>] can play a role in causing chronic bronchitis.

Who is at risk for chronic bronchitis?

The risk factors for chronic bronchitis include:

- **Smoking.** This is the main risk factor. Up to 75% of people who have chronic bronchitis smoke or used to smoke.
- **Long-term exposure to other lung irritants**, such as secondhand smoke, air pollution, and chemical fumes and dusts from the environment or workplace.
- **Age.** Most people who have chronic bronchitis are at least 40 years old when their symptoms begin.
- **Genetics.** This includes alpha-1 antitrypsin deficiency, which is a genetic condition. Also, smokers who get chronic bronchitis are more likely to get it if they have a family history of COPD.

What are the symptoms of chronic bronchitis?

At first, you may have no symptoms or only mild symptoms. As the disease gets worse, your symptoms usually become more severe. They can include:

- Frequent coughing [<https://medlineplus.gov/cough.html>] or a cough that produces a lot of mucus
- Wheezing
- A whistling or squeaky sound when you breathe
- Shortness of breath, especially with physical activity

- Tightness in your chest

Some people with chronic bronchitis get frequent respiratory infections such as colds [<https://medlineplus.gov/commoncold.html>] and the flu [<https://medlineplus.gov/flu.html>] . In severe cases, chronic bronchitis can cause weight loss, weakness in your lower muscles, and swelling [<https://medlineplus.gov/edema.html>] in your ankles, feet, or legs.

How is chronic bronchitis diagnosed?

Your health care provider may use many tools to make a diagnosis:

- A medical history, which includes asking about your symptoms
- A family history
- Various tests, such as lung function tests [<https://medlineplus.gov/lab-tests/lung-function-tests/>] , a chest x-ray [<https://medlineplus.gov/xrays.html>] or CT scan [<https://medlineplus.gov/ctscans.html>] , and blood tests

What are the treatments for chronic bronchitis?

There is no cure for chronic bronchitis. However, treatments can help with symptoms, slow the progress of the disease, and improve your ability to stay active. There are also treatments to prevent or treat complications of the disease. Treatments include:

- **Lifestyle changes**, such as
 - Quitting smoking [<https://medlineplus.gov/quittingsmoking.html>] if you are a smoker. This is the most important step you can take to treat chronic bronchitis.
 - Avoiding secondhand smoke and places where you might breathe in other lung irritants
 - Ask your health care provider for an eating plan that will meet your nutritional needs. Also ask about how much physical activity you can do. Physical activity can strengthen the muscles that help you breathe and improve your overall wellness.
- **Medicines**, such as
 - Bronchodilators, which relax the muscles around your airways. This helps open your airways and makes breathing easier. Most bronchodilators are taken through an inhaler. In more severe cases, the inhaler may also contain steroids [<https://medlineplus.gov/steroids.html>] to reduce inflammation.
 - Vaccines for the flu [<https://medlineplus.gov/flushot.html>] and pneumococcal pneumonia, since people with chronic bronchitis are at higher risk for serious problems from these diseases.
 - Antibiotics [<https://medlineplus.gov/antibiotics.html>] if you get a bacterial or viral lung infection
- Oxygen therapy [<https://medlineplus.gov/oxygentherapy.html>] , if you have severe chronic bronchitis and low levels of oxygen in your blood. Oxygen therapy can help you breathe better. You may need extra oxygen all the time or only at certain times.
- Pulmonary rehabilitation [<https://medlineplus.gov/pulmonaryrehabilitation.html>] , which is a program that helps improve the well-being of people who have chronic breathing problems. It may include
 - An exercise program
 - Disease management training
 - Nutritional counseling
 - Psychological counseling
- A lung transplant [<https://medlineplus.gov/lungtransplantation.html>] , as a last resort for people who have severe symptoms that have not gotten better with medicines

If you have chronic bronchitis, it's important to know when and where to get help for your symptoms. You should get emergency care if you have severe symptoms, such as trouble catching your breath or talking. Call your health care provider if your symptoms are getting worse or if you have signs of an infection, such as a fever [<https://medlineplus.gov/fever.html>] .

Can chronic bronchitis be prevented?

Since smoking causes most cases of chronic bronchitis, the best way to prevent it is to not smoke. It's also important to try to avoid lung irritants such as secondhand smoke, air pollution, chemical fumes, and dusts.

Start Here

- Bronchitis [<https://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/bronchitis>]  (National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute)
Also in Spanish [<https://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/es/salud/bronquitis>]
- Chronic Bronchitis [<https://familydoctor.org/condition/chronic-bronchitis/?adfree=true>] (American Academy of Family Physicians)
Also in Spanish [<https://es.familydoctor.org/condicion/bronquitis-cronica-es/?adfree=true>]

Diagnosis and Tests

- Arterial Blood Gas (ABG) Test [<https://medlineplus.gov/lab-tests/blood-oxygen-level/>]  (National Library of Medicine)
Also in Spanish [<https://medlineplus.gov/spanish/pruebas-de-laboratorio/prueba-de-gasometria-arterial/>]
- Cough [<https://familydoctor.org/symptom/cough/?adfree=true>] (American Academy of Family Physicians)
Also in Spanish [<https://es.familydoctor.org/sintoma/tos/?adfree=true>]
- Lung Function Tests [<https://medlineplus.gov/lab-tests/lung-function-tests/>]  (National Library of Medicine)
Also in Spanish [<https://medlineplus.gov/spanish/pruebas-de-laboratorio/pruebas-de-funcion-pulmonar/>]
- Spirometry [<https://www.lung.org/lung-health-diseases/lung-procedures-and-tests/spirometry>]  (American Lung Association)
- Spirometry [<https://www.mayoclinic.org/tests-procedures/spirometry/about/pac-20385201?p=1>]
(Mayo Foundation for Medical Education and Research)
Also in Spanish [<https://www.mayoclinic.org/es/tests-procedures/spirometry/about/pac-20385201?p=1>]
- Tests for Lung Disease [<https://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/lung-tests>]  (National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute)
Also in Spanish [<https://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/es/salud/pruebas-pulmonares>]

Living With

- Pulmonary Rehabilitation: MedlinePlus Health Topic [<https://medlineplus.gov/pulmonaryrehabilitation.html>] 
(National Library of Medicine)
Also in Spanish [<https://medlineplus.gov/spanish/pulmonaryrehabilitation.html>]

Related Issues

- Humidifiers: Ease Skin, Breathing Symptoms [<https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/common-cold/in-depth/humidifiers/ART-20048021?p=1>]
(Mayo Foundation for Medical Education and Research)
- Marvels of Mucus and Phlegm: The Slime That Keeps You Healthy [<https://newsinhealth.nih.gov/2020/08/marvels-mucus-phlegm>] 
(National Institutes of Health)
Also in Spanish [<https://salud.nih.gov/recursos-de-salud/nih-noticias-de-salud/las-maravillas-de-la-mucosidad-y-la-flema>]

Statistics and Research

- FastStats: Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD) Includes: Chronic Bronchitis and Emphysema [<https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/faststats/copd.htm>]
(National Center for Health Statistics)

Clinical Trials

- ClinicalTrials.gov: Bronchitis [<https://clinicaltrials.gov/search?cond=%22Bronchitis%22&aggFilters=status:not%20rec>] 
(National Institutes of Health)
- ClinicalTrials.gov: Bronchitis, Chronic [<https://clinicaltrials.gov/search?cond=%22Bronchitis,+Chronic%22&aggFilters=status:not%20rec>] 
(National Institutes of Health)

Journal Articles

References and abstracts from MEDLINE/PubMed (National Library of Medicine)

- Article: Genetic Factors Explain Half of the Individual Susceptibility to Chronic Bronchitis,...
[<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/40579575>]

- Article: Relationship between advanced lung cancer inflammation index and all-cause and cause-specific... [<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/40443682>]
- Article: A Systematic Review of Codelists to Identify Chronic Bronchitis and Emphysema... [<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/40433395>]
- Chronic Bronchitis -- see more articles [<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/?term=%22Bronchitis%2C+Chronic%22%5Bmajr%3Aexp%5D+AND+humans%5Bmh%5D+AND+english%5Bla%5D+AND%22last+1+Year%22+%5Bdat%5D+NOT+%28letter%5Bpt%5D+OR+case+reports%5Bpt%5D+OR+editorial%5Bpt%5D+OR+comment%5Bpt%5D%29+AND+free+full+text%5Bsb%5D+>]

Reference Desk

- Bronchi, Bronchial Tree, and Lungs [<https://training.seer.cancer.gov/anatomy/respiratory/passages/bronchi.html>]  (National Cancer Institute)
- How the Lungs Work [<https://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/lungs>]   (National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute)
Also in Spanish [<https://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/es/salud/pulmones>]

Find an Expert

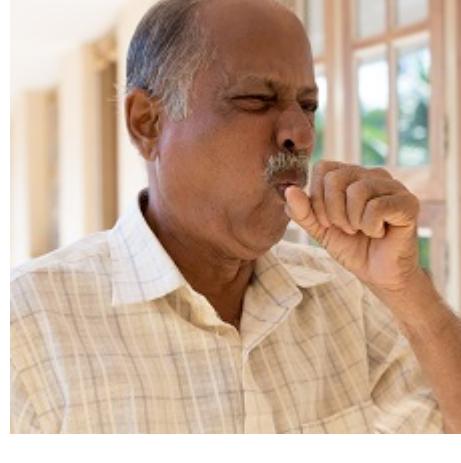
- American Lung Association [<https://www.lung.org/>]
- National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute [<https://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/>] 

Children

- Bronchitis (For Parents) [<https://kidshealth.org/en/parents/bronchitis.html>] (Nemours Foundation)
Also in Spanish [<https://kidshealth.org/es/parents/bronchitis.html>]

Patient Handouts

- How to breathe when you are short of breath [<https://medlineplus.gov/ency/patientinstructions/000053.htm>] (Medical Encyclopedia)
Also in Spanish [<https://medlineplus.gov/spanish/ency/patientinstructions/000053.htm>]
- Traveling with breathing problems [<https://medlineplus.gov/ency/patientinstructions/000066.htm>] (Medical Encyclopedia)
Also in Spanish [<https://medlineplus.gov/spanish/ency/patientinstructions/000066.htm>]
- Using oxygen at home [<https://medlineplus.gov/ency/patientinstructions/000048.htm>] (Medical Encyclopedia)
Also in Spanish [<https://medlineplus.gov/spanish/ency/patientinstructions/000048.htm>]



MEDICAL ENCYCLOPEDIA

Blood gases [<https://medlineplus.gov/ency/article/003855.htm>]

Chest x-ray [<https://medlineplus.gov/ency/article/003804.htm>]

How to breathe when you are short of breath [<https://medlineplus.gov/ency/patientinstructions/000053.htm>]

Oxygen safety [<https://medlineplus.gov/ency/patientinstructions/000049.htm>]

Traveling with breathing problems [<https://medlineplus.gov/ency/patientinstructions/000066.htm>]

Using oxygen at home [<https://medlineplus.gov/ency/patientinstructions/000048.htm>]

Using oxygen at home - what to ask your doctor [<https://medlineplus.gov/ency/patientinstructions/000251.htm>]

Related Health Topics

Acute Bronchitis [<https://medlineplus.gov/acutebronchitis.html>]

Asthma [<https://medlineplus.gov/asthma.html>]

COPD [<https://medlineplus.gov/copd.html>]

Emphysema [<https://medlineplus.gov/emphysema.html>]

Oxygen Therapy [<https://medlineplus.gov/oxygentherapy.html>]

Pulmonary Rehabilitation [<https://medlineplus.gov/pulmonaryrehabilitation.html>]

National Institutes of Health

The primary NIH organization for research on *Chronic Bronchitis* is the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute [<http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/>]

Other Languages

Find health information in languages other than English [<https://medlineplus.gov/languages/chronicbronchitis.html>] on *Chronic Bronchitis*

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