

# I have a bad cough

Doctor word: Acute bronchitis

Why do I keep coughing? Build up of mucus in your lungs and throat causes you to cough. Many times this fluid is created by your body to wash out an infecting virus. This type of infection is known as “bronchitis”. The excess mucus makes breathing harder, sometimes causing wheezing.

What causes bronchitis? Many things. These include cold viruses (most common), bacteria, smoking, and air pollution. Only bacterial infections are cured with antibiotics. Smokers are more likely to get bronchitis because their lungs are already not as healthy as nonsmokers. A cough can last for 1-2 weeks after getting over a cold while your lungs recover from the infection.

Do antibiotics help? Not usually. Bronchitis is mainly caused by cold viruses which are not killed by antibiotics. Only take antibiotics if prescribed by your doctor and finish all the pills. Antibiotics can create stronger germs or be harmful if taken when not needed.

## Cover your mouth and wash your hands!!

What can I do to get better? Rest and drinking plenty of fluids is the best way to get better quickly. Using a humidifier or taking a hot shower may relieve some symptoms. You should not smoke and avoid areas with lots of dust or air pollutants.

Should I see a doctor? If your cough lasts for longer than a month or wheezing continues, you should consult a doctor. Other reasons to visit a doctor include feeling very sick, weak, high fevers, coughing up blood, or difficulty breathing especially when lying down. Bronchitis can be confused with asthma, allergies, and pneumonia. Discuss with the doctor your symptoms to determine your cause and treatment options.

Can I avoid getting bronchitis? YES. Washing your hands is the easiest way to prevent the spread of viruses which cause most bronchitis. Cold viruses like to infect you when your body’s immune system is weak. To keep your immune system healthy, eat right, exercise regularly, get plenty of rest, stay hydrated and don’t smoke. Smoking around children can make them more likely to get bronchitis and develop more serious problems such as asthma.



*Infectious Disease Epidemiology*  
Adapted from Washington State Department of Health,  
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