

Chronic Bronchitis

What is chronic bronchitis?

Bronchitis is swelling and irritation of your airways that makes it harder to breathe. When bronchitis is chronic, it means that you have symptoms year after year for months at a time.

Chronic bronchitis is 1 of the 2 main types of serious lung disease called chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD). Emphysema, which is damage to lung tissue, is the other type. These diseases are most common among older adults, especially smokers.

Chronic bronchitis usually gets worse slowly over months or years, but treatment will help control your symptoms and help you feel better.

What is the cause?

Chronic bronchitis happens when your airways are damaged. The airways are the tubes and sacs that carry air in and out of your lungs. The damage is almost always caused by irritation of the lungs over many years. The damaged airways swell and make extra mucus. The swelling makes the inside of the airways get smaller. The airways become blocked by mucus, making it hard for air to pass in and out of your lungs. This causes wheezing and trouble breathing.

Cigarette smoking is the most common cause of irritation. Other causes are exposure to secondhand smoke, air pollution, chemical fumes, dust, and frequent lung infections.

What are the symptoms?

The main symptom of chronic bronchitis is a deep cough that produces a lot of mucus. You have the cough every day or almost every day for months at a time. You may also have wheezing and feel short of breath. Your symptoms may get better but then come back several times each year, especially during the winter.

How is it diagnosed?

Your healthcare provider will ask about your symptoms and medical history, work history, smoking habits, and exposure to cigarette smoke. Your provider will examine you. Tests may include:

- Lab tests of mucus to look for bacterial infection and other medical problems that might be the cause of your symptoms
- Chest X-ray
- Blood tests
- A breathing test called spirometry

When you have the breathing test, you will breathe into a tube to measure how well air moves into and out of your lungs. The test can show how well your lungs are working.

How is it treated?

There is no cure for chronic bronchitis, but there are treatments that can:

- Relieve symptoms so you can breathe and feel better.
- Help you be more active.
- Treat infections.
- Help prevent complications.

If you are a smoker, the most important part of your treatment is to **quit smoking**. Talk to your healthcare provider about ways to quit. You might find it helpful to join a quit-smoking program, use nicotine patches or gum, or try one of the prescription medicines that can help you quit.

Your healthcare provider may prescribe the following medicines:

- **Bronchodilator:** This medicine relaxes the muscles of the airways. It makes the openings inside the airways bigger, so it's easier to breathe. Usually you take this medicine by inhaling it (breathing it into your lungs), but it may also be taken as pills or liquid.
- **Steroid:** Steroid medicine helps keep down the swelling inside your airways. You may need steroids if your symptoms are severe or if you start having symptoms more often. Steroids are usually inhaled, but they may also be taken as a pill.

Using a steroid for a long time can have serious side effects. Take steroid medicine exactly as your healthcare provider prescribes. Don't take more or less of it than prescribed by your provider and don't take it longer than prescribed. Don't stop taking a steroid without your provider's approval. You may have to lower your dosage slowly before stopping it.

- **Antibiotic:** If you have a bacterial infection, your provider will prescribe an antibiotic.

Your healthcare provider may also recommend:

- Regular exercise, such as walking or riding a stationary bicycle
- Breathing exercises
- A humidifier to add moisture to the air
- Changes in your work environment so you are not around things that irritate your lungs
- Oxygen

You may have a follow-up visit with your healthcare provider to be sure any infections have been cleared up. Your provider may want you to schedule regular checkups to see how you are doing and whether you need any treatment changes.

How can I take care of myself?

Follow your healthcare provider's instructions and recommended treatment. This includes:

- Take all of your medicine according to your provider's instructions.
- Ask your provider if a pulmonary rehab program might be helpful. Pulmonary rehab can help you with exercise training, emotional support, and even planning healthy meals.
- Use oxygen therapy as directed by your provider.
- Take good care of your heart. Keep your blood pressure and cholesterol levels normal. This disease can damage the heart over time, so work with your healthcare provider to keep your heart healthy.
- Ask your healthcare provider what symptoms you should watch for and when you should call for help. Be sure to call your healthcare provider if your symptoms do not get better and especially if they get worse.
- Ask your provider what activities you should avoid and when you can return to your normal activities.
- Make sure you know when you should come back for a checkup. Keep your follow-up appointments.

Stay as safe and healthy as you can.

- Don't smoke.
- Avoid exposure to tobacco smoke, polluted air, dust, fumes, chemicals, and mold.
- Get a flu shot every year and avoid close contact with people who have colds or the flu.
- Wash your hands often and well, especially when you are in public places or around children.
- Ask about getting a pneumococcal shot to help protect against a serious infection.
- Avoid extreme changes in temperature and humidity, especially hot temperatures and high humidity. They can make it harder for you to get enough oxygen.
- If you use a humidifier, keep the humidifier clean and free of bacteria and fungus.
- Get plenty of rest and sleep.
- If you plan to travel, discuss your plans with your healthcare provider to see if there are specific instructions you need to follow. For example, ask if it is safe for you to be at high altitudes (5,000 feet or higher) or in areas with high temperatures, high humidity, or a lot of smog or smoke. If you are flying and use oxygen, call the airlines to learn their policies about using oxygen on the plane.

Eat a healthy diet.

- Eat healthy meals. Getting the right nutrition can help your breathing.

- Eat high-calorie snacks between meals if you are underweight. Ask your healthcare provider about drinking nutrition supplements. Take vitamin and mineral supplements if recommended by your healthcare provider.
- Drink more liquids (water or tea) every day to help you cough up mucus more easily unless your provider says you need to limit fluids because of another medical condition you have.

Get the exercise recommended by your healthcare provider.

- If you are able to exercise, get regular exercise according to your healthcare provider's recommendations. Exercise will help keep your heart and other muscles healthy. Don't start an exercise program without your provider's approval.
- Do the breathing exercises recommended by your provider. They can help strengthen the muscles used for breathing. You may need a physical therapist to help you learn to do them properly.

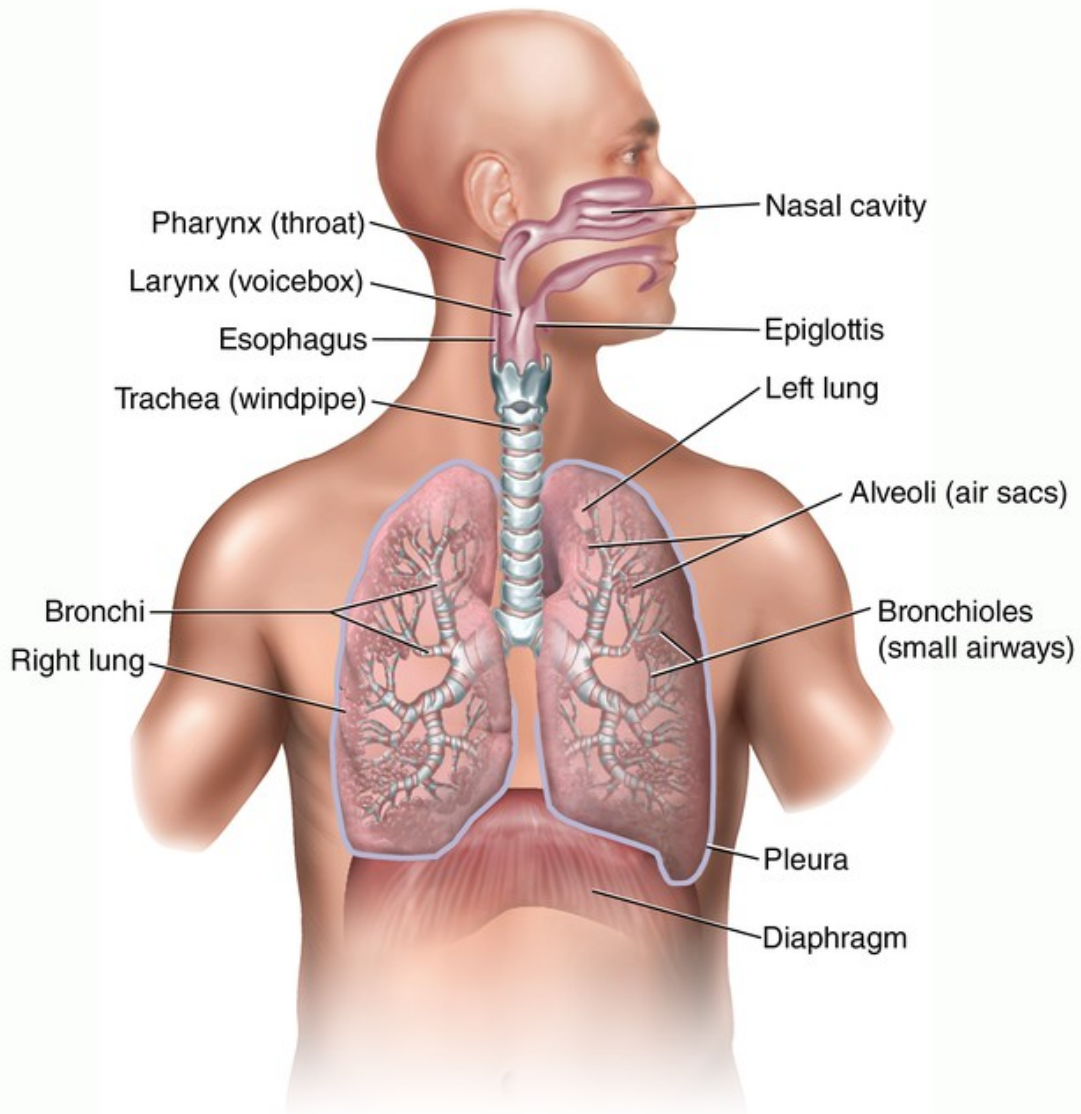
How can I help prevent chronic bronchitis?

- If you smoke, try to quit. Talk to your healthcare provider about ways to quit smoking.
- Avoid exposure to smog and other air pollutants, including secondhand smoke.
- Try to avoid frequent chest infections. For example:
 - Wash your hands often, especially when you are around people with colds or the flu.
 - If you have asthma or allergies, keep your symptoms under good control.
- When you do have symptoms of an infection, see your healthcare provider to see if it needs treatment.

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Respiratory System



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