

Patient education: Bronchiolitis (and RSV) (The Basics)

[Written by the doctors and editors at UpToDate](#)

What is bronchiolitis? — Bronchiolitis is an infection that affects a part of the lungs called the "bronchioles." The bronchioles are the small, branching tubes that carry air in and out of the lungs. When these tubes are infected, they get swollen and full of mucus ([figure 1](#)). That makes it hard to breathe.

Bronchiolitis usually affects children younger than 2 years of age. In most children, bronchiolitis goes away on its own. But some children with bronchiolitis need to be seen by a doctor. The most common cause of bronchiolitis is a virus called "respiratory syncytial virus," or "RSV."

What are the symptoms of bronchiolitis? — Bronchiolitis usually begins like a regular cold. Children who get bronchiolitis usually start off with:

- A stuffy or runny nose
- A mild cough
- A fever (temperature higher than 100.4°F or 38°C)
- A decreased appetite

As bronchiolitis progresses, other symptoms can start, including:

- Breathing fast or having trouble breathing. In babies, the first sign can be a pause in breathing that lasts more than 15 or 20 seconds.
- Wheezing, or a whistling sound when breathing (which usually lasts about 7 days)
- A severe cough (which can last for 14 days or longer)
- Trouble eating and drinking (because of the other symptoms)

Should I take my child to see a doctor or nurse? — Many children with bronchiolitis do not need to see a doctor. But you should watch for some important symptoms.

Call for an ambulance (in the US and Canada, dial 9-1-1) if your child:

- Stops breathing
- Starts to turn blue or very pale
- Has a very hard time breathing
- Starts grunting
- Looks like he or she is getting tired of having to work so hard to breathe

Call your child's doctor or nurse if you have any questions or concerns about your child, or if:

- The skin and muscles between your child's ribs or below your child's ribcage look like they are caving in ([figure 2](#))
- Your child's nostrils flare (get bigger) when he or she takes a breath
- Your baby younger than 3 months has a fever (temperature greater than 100.4°F or 38°C)
- Your child older than 3 months has a fever (temperature greater than 100.4°F or 38°C) for more than 3 days
- Your baby has fewer wet diapers than normal

How is bronchiolitis treated? — The main treatments for bronchiolitis are aimed at making sure that your child is getting enough oxygen. To do that, the doctor or nurse might need to suction the mucus from your child's nose, or give your child moist air or oxygen to breathe.

The doctor will probably not offer antibiotics, because bronchiolitis is caused by viruses, and antibiotics do not work on viruses.

Is there anything I can do on my own to help my child feel better? — Yes. Here are some things you can do:

- Make sure your child gets enough fluids. Call the doctor or nurse if your baby has fewer wet diapers than normal.
- Use a humidifier in your child's bedroom
- If your child is uncomfortable because of fever, you can treat the fever with over-the-counter medicines, such as [acetaminophen](#) (sample brand name: Tylenol) or [ibuprofen](#) (sample brand names: Advil, Motrin). Never give [aspirin](#) to a child younger than 18 years old.
- Suction the mucus from your child's nose with a suction bulb
- If your child is older than 1 year, feed him or her warm, clear liquids to soothe the throat and to help loosen mucus
- Prop your child's head up on pillows, if he or she is over a year old. (Do not use pillows if your child is younger than 1 year.)

- Sleep in the same room as your child, so that you know right away if he or she starts having trouble breathing
- Do not allow anyone to smoke near your child

How did my child get bronchiolitis? — Bronchiolitis is caused by viruses that spread easily from person to person. These viruses live in the droplets that go into the air when a sick person coughs or sneezes.

Can bronchiolitis be prevented? — You can reduce the chances that your child will get bronchiolitis by:

- Washing your hands and your child's hands often with soap and water, or using alcohol hand rubs
- Staying away from other adults and children who are sick
- Getting a flu shot every year for you and your child

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[Patient education: Flu \(The Basics\)](#)

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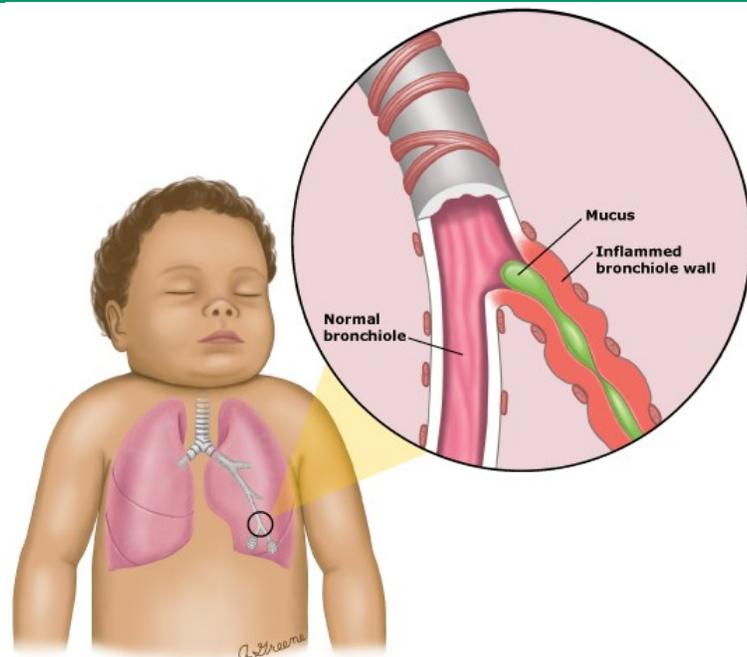
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GRAPHICS

Bronchiolitis



Bronchiolitis is an infection that affects the small tubes that carry air in and out of the lungs. When infected, these tubes (called bronchioles) get swollen and inflamed. That makes it harder to breathe.

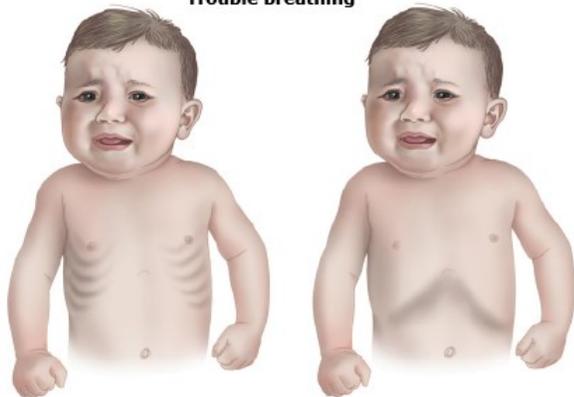
Graphic 52758 Version 4.0

Signs of severe trouble breathing (retractions)

Normal



Trouble breathing



When a child is having a lot of trouble breathing, the skin and muscles between the child's ribs or below the child's ribcage look like they are caving in.

Graphic 59786 Version 2.0

