

Bronchiolitis



What is Bronchiolitis?

Bronchiolitis is a viral infection of the lower respiratory tract, which causes inflammation and mucous blockage of the smallest airways in the lungs. It is often caused by Respiratory Syncytial Virus (RSV) and other 'flu-like viruses and is spread by droplet infection. Bronchiolitis can make your baby cough and have breathing difficulties. It commonly affects babies and children under two years but is more prevalent between 3 and 6 months.

Symptoms

Bronchiolitis starts with symptoms similar to a common cold, including cough, runny nose and slight fever. Symptoms usually improve after three days and are generally mild. But in some cases, it can cause more severe symptoms, which can worsen by the 3rd day. These include difficulty in breathing, problems feeding and vomiting after feeds, which can lead to dehydration.

Is it common?

Bronchiolitis is most common in babies aged 3 to 6 months. However, by age 2, nearly all infants would have had at least one infection, often only suffering mild symptoms. It usually occurs over the winter months in temperate countries, but in Singapore, it can occur at any time of the year.





Treatment

As bronchiolitis is a viral infection, there is no specific treatment. Still, there are some medicines that you can give your baby to help relieve their symptoms, including normal saline nose drops to help improve the congestion. Paracetamol can also be administered for the management of fever.

Your child must be given regular fluids, so they do not become dehydrated. If your child has any breathing difficulties, giving fluids often and in small amounts is advised. Also, check that your child passes a good amount of urine to mark their hydration status.

Try to position your baby upright by propping up the mattress. For an older child, giving an extra pillow can make breathing easier as the upright position helps to open up the airways.

Keeping your child away from irritating fumes such as cigarette smoke will prevent further breathing difficulties. Approximately 3% of babies need admission to the hospital if their breathing difficulties are severe, they are not taking enough feed, or they are not getting enough oxygen in their blood.

When to seek advice

Contact your doctor if you are concerned about your child:

- Is struggling to breathe, coughing, wheezing
- Is having difficulty feeding or is becoming dehydrated
- Is more sleepy/lethargic than usual
- Is pale or sweaty
- Has a change in skin colour (example; looks blue or mottled), particularly the lips and the fingernails
- Has no wet nappy for over 12 hours or passing small amounts of concentrated (dark yellow) urine
- Is breathing very rapidly



Long term effects

Bronchiolitis is a virus, so symptoms should start to improve after day three and fully resolve after two weeks if mild. Bronchiolitis can cause inflammatory damage to the airways, which may last several weeks. 20% of babies remain wheezy for a prolonged period or have a cough lasting for a few weeks. There is no evidence to show a link to developing asthma when older.

Further reading:

www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk

www.rch.org.au

www.mayoclinic.com

