

Parent Information Sheet - Bronchiolitis

Bronchiolitis is a common chest infection in young children. It usually causes a flu like illness that affects infants in the first year of life. It is caused by several different viruses. Bronchiolitis occurs frequently in the winter months and rarely in summer.

How does the illness develop?

The illness begins as a cold. After a day or so, your baby begins to cough, and the breathing becomes fast and sounds wheezy. This fast, wheezy breathing can make it difficult for your baby to feed. Some children may need to be admitted to hospital because of these problems.

The first symptoms your child may have are the same as a common cold. These symptoms last one to two days and include:

- a runny nose
- a mild cough

They are followed by an increase in problems related to breathing, such as:

- fast breathing
- poor feeding
- noisy breathing (wheezing)
- drawing in of the chest with each breath
- fever

What can I expect once my baby starts to become ill?

Babies with bronchiolitis are usually worst on the second or third day and are often sick for 7 to 10 days. The cough may continue for 2 to 4 weeks.

Are tests needed to diagnose bronchiolitis?

A chest X-ray is not recommended as it has been proven that it does not help with the management in infants presenting with bronchiolitis. Blood tests are not helpful.

Are there any medications that may help?

Medicines do not usually help babies with bronchiolitis.

- Antibiotics are not given because bronchiolitis is caused by a virus and antibiotics do not cure viruses
- VentolinTM, AtroventTM or other puffers are not prescribed as these have been proven not to help as the wheezing is not related to asthma, in fact they may cause harm
- Steroids such as PredmixTM or cortisone based medicines also do not help

What else can I do for my baby?

Babies need to rest and have small feeds more often, so they don't get too tired when feeding and do not get dehydrated.

Home Management

Most babies with bronchiolitis can be managed at home.

- Do not smoke in the home or around your baby. This is especially important around babies with any breathing problems.
- Encourage the baby to rest.
- Give shorter breast feeds/formula/water more frequently. This way your child does not get too tired when feeding. If your child does not get enough fluids they can get dehydrated.
- You can give Paracetamol (eg. Panadol™, Dymadon™, Panamax™) if needed.
- Avoid contact with other babies in the first few days, as bronchiolitis is an infectious disease.
- Hand washing assists with the prevention of spread of the virus

If your baby is distressed and having trouble feeding they may need to be admitted to hospital.

Staff may need to:

- Watch them closely to ensure they do not become more unwell.
- Give them some extra oxygen.
- Give them extra fluids through a drip into a vein or tube placed through the nose into the stomach.

Medical Review/Follow-up

Go to the nearest doctor or hospital emergency department if your child:

- has difficulty breathing (very fast or not regular breaths)
- cannot feed normally because of coughing or wheezing
- turns blue or has skin that is pale and sweaty

Make an appointment for your child to see a doctor if:

- they have a cough that is getting worse
- they have less than half their normal feeds or are refusing food or drinks
- they seem very tired or are more sleepy than usual
- you are worried in any way

Key points to remember

Babies need to rest and drink small amounts more often.

Bronchiolitis is an infectious disease in the first few days of illness.

It is more common in babies under six months old.

Babies are usually sick for three to five days, and then recover over the next 7 to 10 days. The cough may continue for 2 to 4 weeks.

Smoking in the home increases the chance of babies having bronchiolitis and will make it worse.

For more information

Your local doctor

Your local hospital emergency department

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