

 [COVID-19 Vaccine Information \(https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/coronavirus/covid-19-vaccine/\)](https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/coronavirus/covid-19-vaccine/) | [Patient Care Options \(https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/coronavirus/for-johns-hopkins-patients.html\)](https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/coronavirus/for-johns-hopkins-patients.html) | [Visitor Guidelines \(https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/coronavirus/visitor-guidelines.html\)](https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/coronavirus/visitor-guidelines.html) | [Coronavirus Information \(https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/coronavirus/index.html\)](https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/coronavirus/index.html) | [Self-Checker \(https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/coronavirus/covid-19-self-checker.html\)](https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/coronavirus/covid-19-self-checker.html) | [Get Email Alerts \(https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/coronavirus/newsletter\)](https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/coronavirus/newsletter)

Chronic Bronchitis

- Johns Hopkins Medicine

 [Lung and Respiratory System \(https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/health/lung-and-respiratory-system\)](https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/health/lung-and-respiratory-system)

What is chronic bronchitis?

Bronchitis is inflammation of the breathing tubes. These are the airways called bronchi. This inflammation causes too much mucus production and other changes. There are different types of bronchitis. But the most common are acute and chronic.

Chronic bronchitis is long-term inflammation of the bronchi. It is common among smokers. People with chronic bronchitis tend to get lung infections more easily. They also have episodes of acute bronchitis, when symptoms are worse.

To be classified as chronic bronchitis:

You must have a cough and mucus most days for at least 3 months a year, for 2 years in a row.

Other causes of symptoms, such as tuberculosis or other lung diseases, must be ruled out.

People with chronic bronchitis have chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD). This is a large group of lung diseases that includes chronic bronchitis. These diseases can block air flow in the lungs and cause breathing problems.

The 2 most common conditions of COPD are chronic bronchitis and emphysema.

What causes chronic bronchitis?

Chronic bronchitis is not caused by a virus or bacteria. Most experts agree that the main cause of chronic bronchitis is cigarette smoking. Air pollution and your work environment may also play a role. This is especially true if you also smoke.

Bronchitis symptoms often happen with other lung diseases, such as:

- Asthma

- Pulmonary emphysema

- Scarring of the lungs (pulmonary fibrosis)

- Sinusitis

- Tuberculosis

- Upper respiratory infections

What are the symptoms of chronic bronchitis?

Below are the most common symptoms of chronic bronchitis. But each person may have slightly different symptoms.

Symptoms may include:

- Cough, often called smoker's cough

- Coughing up mucus (expectoration)

- Wheezing

- Chest discomfort

People with chronic bronchitis often have a cough and make mucus for many years before they have shortness of breath.

Chronic bronchitis may cause:

- Disability

- Frequent and severe infections that affect your airways

- Narrowing and plugging of your breathing tubes (bronchi)

- Trouble breathing

Other symptoms may include:

Bluish fingernails, lips, and skin because of lower oxygen levels

Wheezing and crackling sounds with breathing

Swollen feet

Heart failure

The symptoms of chronic bronchitis may look like other lung conditions or health problems. See your healthcare provider for a diagnosis.

How is chronic bronchitis diagnosed?

Your healthcare provider will take a complete health history and do a physical exam. He or she may order the following tests:

Pulmonary function tests

These tests help to measure the lungs' ability to move air in and out of your lungs. The tests are often done with special machines that you breathe into. They may include:

Spirometry. This test uses a spirometer device to see how well your lungs are working. It is one of the simplest, most common pulmonary function tests. It may be used for any or all of these reasons:

- To find out how well your lungs take in, hold, and move air

- To keep watch on a lung disease

- To see how well treatment is working

- To find out how serious your lung disease is

- To find out if your lung disease is restrictive or obstructive. Restrictive means less air will get into your lungs. Obstructive means less air will get out of your lungs.

Peak flow monitor. This test measures the fastest speed you can blow air out of your lungs. Inflammation and mucus in the large airways in the lungs narrow the airways. This slows the speed of air leaving the lungs. It can be measured with a peak flow monitor. This measurement is very important in telling how well your disease is being controlled.

Arterial blood gas

This blood test is used to check the amount of oxygen and carbon dioxide in your blood. It also measures the acidity of your blood.

Pulse oximetry

An oximeter is a small machine that measures the amount of oxygen in your blood. To get this measurement, a small sensor is taped or clipped onto a finger or toe. When the machine is on, a small red light can be seen in the sensor. The sensor is painless, and the red light does not get hot.

Chest X-ray

This test makes pictures of your internal tissues, bones, and organs, including the lungs.

CT scan

This imaging test uses a combination of X-rays and computer technology to make images of the body. A CT scan shows detailed images of any part of the body, including the bones, muscles, fat, and organs. CT scans are more detailed than general X-rays.

How is chronic bronchitis treated?

Treatment for chronic bronchitis is aimed at treating the causes and symptoms. It may include:

- Quitting smoking

- Staying away from secondhand smoke and other lung irritants

- Taking medicines by mouth (oral) to open airways and help clear away mucus

- Taking inhaled medicines, such as bronchodilators and steroids

- Getting oxygen from portable containers

- Having lung reduction surgery to take out damaged areas of the lung

- Getting a lung transplant, in rare cases

- Humidifying the air

- Pulmonary rehab to help you learn how to live with your breathing problems and stay active

Key points about chronic bronchitis

Bronchitis is inflammation of the breathing tubes (bronchi). There are several types of bronchitis, but the most common are acute and chronic.

Chronic bronchitis is often part of chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD). This is a group of lung diseases that cause airflow blockage and breathing problems.

The most important cause of chronic bronchitis is cigarette smoking. Air pollution and your work environment may also play a role.

This condition causes a cough that's often called smoker's cough. It also causes you to cough up mucus, wheeze, and have chest discomfort. These may get worse over time and lead to severe breathing problems.

Tests that help measure how well your lungs are working are used to diagnose chronic bronchitis. Blood, breathing, and imaging tests may also be used to see how severe the problem is and watch it over time.

The goal of treatment is to live more comfortably by controlling symptoms. A key part of treatment is to quit smoking.

Next steps

Tips to help you get the most from a visit to your healthcare provider:

Know the reason for your visit and what you want to happen.

Before your visit, write down questions you want answered.

Bring someone with you to help you ask questions and remember what your healthcare provider tells you.

At the visit, write down the name of a new diagnosis, and any new medicines, treatments, or tests. Also write down any new instructions your healthcare provider gives you.

Know why a new medicine or treatment is prescribed, and how it will help you. Also know what the side effects are.

Ask if your condition can be treated in other ways.

Know why a test or procedure is recommended and what the results could mean.

Know what to expect if you do not take the medicine or have the test or procedure.

If you have a follow-up appointment, write down the date, time, and purpose for that visit.

Know how you can contact your healthcare provider if you have questions.

Request an Appointment

Maryland 410-955-5000

Outside of Maryland 855-695-4872

International +1-410-502-7683

Related

[Acute Bronchitis](https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/health/conditions-and-diseases/acute-bronchitis)

(<https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/health/conditions-and-diseases/acute-bronchitis>).

[Winter Illness Guide](https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/health/conditions-and-diseases/winter-illness-guide)

(<https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/health/conditions-and-diseases/winter-illness-guide>).

[Bronchitis \(https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/health/conditions-and-diseases/bronchitis\)](https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/health/conditions-and-diseases/bronchitis)

Related Topics

[Lung and Respiratory System \(https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/health/lung-and-respiratory-system\)](https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/health/lung-and-respiratory-system)

Copyright © 2021 The Johns Hopkins University, The Johns Hopkins Hospital, and Johns Hopkins Health System. All rights reserved.