

BRONCHIOLITIS

WHAT IS BRONCHIOLITIS

Bronchiolitis is an acute respiratory infection of children usually less than two years of age. The term bronchiolitis means inflammation of the bronchioles, or very small air passages within the lungs.

WHAT CAUSES BRONCHIOLITIS

It is usually caused by a virus. Many different viruses can cause the same type of infection, but the commonest is called Respiratory Syncytial Virus (RSV).

HOW IS IT SPREAD

It usually spreads from one patient to another, either by breathing infection droplets present in the air or by direct contact with infected secretions of the patient. It is very difficult to prevent spread of the disease but frequent hand washing may help to curtail it.

WHAT ARE THE SIGNS OF INFECTION

Usually, the infection starts like a cold. The child may have a runny nose, congestion, cough, and a mild fever. As the illness progresses, the child gets worse and starts to breathe faster than usual and may wheeze. He may also develop difficulty in breathing and may appear to work very hard to breathe. In very severe cases, the child may appear tired, not want to eat or drink and generally be very unwell.

CAN IT BE DANGEROUS

Most normal children will recover spontaneously with time. However, in some patients, the illness may be very severe and cause them not to be able to breathe. Sometimes, these patients will go on to develop further complications, like pneumonia. A small number of patients may have very severe illness and can die from it.

Some children are more prone to develop serious disease and complications – these include very young babies, babies who were born premature, children with pre-existing lung disease and children who have congenital heart disease. Such children usually have a more prolonged illness.

WHAT IS THE TREATMENT

No specific drugs exist that effectively kill the viruses which cause bronchiolitis. Antibiotics are of no use against viruses. Treatment is therefore, symptomatic and supportive. In mild cases, no treatment is necessary. Children who are sicker will have to be admitted to hospital. The doctor may request blood tests and X-rays of the chest. Treatment is supportive and the child may be given oxygen and nebulized medications to help decrease wheezing. If the child is breathing very fast, the doctor may ask feeding to be stopped and give the child intravenous fluids instead. If the doctor suspects that the child has a bacterial infection, then antibiotics may also be prescribed. The length of stay in hospital depends on the individual patient and can vary greatly.

Children who are very sick with bronchiolitis and may have to be admitted to the Intensive Care Unit. They may require a mechanical ventilator (respirator) to help them breathe.

ARE THERE ANY LONG TERM EFFECTS OF BRONCHIOLITIS

Most children recover completely. However, depending on the severity of the disease, the child may have long-term lung sequelae. These may range from simply needing some oxygen to more serious breathing problems. He may also have a tendency to wheeze. Since many different viruses cause bronchiolitis, there is no immunity from one infection and the child can get another episode of illness.

HOW CAN I HELP MY CHILD

Give him plenty of fluids (don't worry if he won't take solid food)

Give Paracetamol (Crocin syrup) for fever

WHEN SHOULD CALL THE DOCTOR

If your child keeps on vomiting and can't keep even liquids down.

If he is breathing very fast (more than 40 times a minute)

If he has to sit up to breathe

If he is working very hard to breathe (you can see his chest wall and neck breathing muscles pull taut with each breath and his chest is drawn in each time)

If he looks blue