

What is bronchiolitis?

Bronchiolitis is when the tiniest air passages in your baby's lungs become swollen. This can make it more difficult for your baby to breathe. Usually, bronchiolitis is caused by a virus called respiratory syncytial virus (known as RSV).

Almost all children will have had an infection caused by RSV by the time they are two years. It is most common in the winter months and usually only causes mild symptoms like a cold. Most children get better on their own.

Some babies, especially very young ones, can have difficulty with breathing or feeding and may need to go to hospital.

Can I prevent bronchiolitis?

No. The virus that causes bronchiolitis in babies also causes coughs and colds in older children and adults, so it is very difficult to prevent.

What are the symptoms?

- Bronchiolitis starts like a simple cold. Your baby may have a runny nose and sometimes a temperature and a cough.
- After a few days your baby's cough may become worse.
- Your baby's breathing may become faster than normal, and it may become noisy. He or she may need to make more effort to breathe.
- Sometimes in very young babies, bronchiolitis may cause them to have brief pauses in their breathing.
- As breathing becomes more difficult, your baby may not be able to take the usual amount of milk by breast or bottle. You may notice fewer wet nappies than usual.
- Your baby may be sick after feeding and become irritable.

How can I help my baby?

- If feeding is difficult, try breast feeding more often or offering smaller bottle feeds more often.
- If your baby has a temperature, you can give him or her paracetamol (for example Calpol® or Disprol®). You must follow the manufacturer's instructions that come with the paracetamol carefully. Please seek specific advice for new-born babies and if you are not sure then ask your community pharmacist.
- If your baby is already taking any medicines or inhalers, you should carry on using these. If you find it difficult to get your baby to take them, ask your doctor for advice.
- Bronchiolitis is caused by a virus. Antibiotics won't help.
- Make sure your baby is not exposed to tobacco smoke. Passive smoking can seriously damage your baby's health. It makes breathing problems like bronchiolitis worse.

How long does bronchiolitis last?

- Most babies get better within about two weeks. They may still have a cough for a few more weeks.
- Your baby can go back to nursery or day care as soon as he or she is well enough (that is feeding normally and with no difficulty breathing).
- There is usually no need to see the doctor if your baby is recovering well. If you are worried about your baby's progress, discuss this with your doctor or health visitor.

When should I get advice?

Please contact your GP or 111 if:

- You are worried about your baby
- Your baby is having difficulty breathing
- Your baby is taking less than half his or her usual feeds over two to three feeds, or has no wet nappy for 12 hours
- Your baby has a high temperature, or
- Your baby seems very tired or irritable

Phone 999 for an ambulance if:

Your baby is struggling to breathe

Your baby's tongue and lips are turning blue

There are long pauses in your baby's breathing

Are you a victim of Domestic Violence? For confidential advice, contact:

Bradford	0808 2800 999	https://www.stayingput.uk.net/contact
North Yorkshire	03000 110 110	https://www.idas.org.uk/
Lancashire	0300 323 0085	https://www.lancashire.gov.uk/health-and-social-care/your-health-and-wellbeing/domestic-abuse/

If you require this leaflet in other languages or formats please telephone the Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) on 01535 294019

Author: Dr Richard Keeble. Approved by: Emergency Department Clinical Governance Group
Date of publication: December 2017
Revised: February 2022
Date of review: February 2025