Bronchitis
Acute and chronic: knowing the difference

THE CHANGING OF THE SEASONS, and especially the rapid return of brisk temperatures in the fall, often brings with it seasonal sicknesses. While the flu is everyone’s first concern, bronchitis is also something to be watchful for.

Bronchitis is the general term for any inflammation of the bronchial tubes — a problem some 5% of people will suffer with every year, most commonly in fall and winter.

While most symptoms disappear in a short time with the help of antibiotics, sometimes they don’t. This is because there are two types of bronchitis: acute, which is short term, and chronic, which is ongoing. This handout discusses the differences between the two.

Acute Bronchitis
This is the most common form, and most patients won’t suffer long with the right care. Among the symptoms that characterize a case of acute bronchitis are:

- A hacking cough that brings up yellow, white or green mucus
- Wheezing when breathing in or out
- Chest pain, tightness or discomfort
- A low fever and/or chills
- Shortness of breath

Acute bronchitis is caused by the same viruses which cause colds and the flu. They are spread through physical contact, such as shaking hands, and are also airborne.

While acute bronchitis typically lasts only a few to 10 days, the characteristic coughing may last several weeks. There are numerous risk factors which can make one susceptible to acute bronchitis, including:

- Exposure to tobacco smoke, including secondhand smoke
- Dust
- Fumes
- Vapors
- Air pollution

Avoiding these risk factors will go a long way to help you avoid developing acute bronchitis. Although it often lasts no more than a few days to a week, it is important to see your doctor if you begin exhibiting strong symptoms to rule out other serious respiratory conditions, including chronic bronchitis.

Chronic Bronchitis
Chronic bronchitis is ongoing and much more serious than acute. Occurring in the lining of the bronchial tubes, chronic bronchitis is a condition of constant inflammation and irritation. This creates a long-term cough containing mucus. The number one cause of chronic bronchitis is smoking.

Some symptoms of chronic bronchitis are:

- Persistent cough producing yellow, white or green phlegm (for at least three months of the year, and for more than two consecutive years)
- Wheezing
- Breathlessness

In addition to the perpetual aggravation, the airways affected by chronic bronchitis are vulnerable to viruses and bacteria; they can easily become infected, prolonging and worsening the illness. For this reason, sufferers of chronic bronchitis regularly have periods where their symptoms worsen.

While chronic bronchitis is a serious medical condition with little chance of complete recovery, early treatment, in conjunction with quitting smoking and avoiding secondhand smoke, can help to minimize symptoms and get you back to your daily routines.

Likewise, an annual flu vaccination — and a lifetime vaccination against pneumonia — are recommended to avoid coming down with those illnesses on top of one’s chronic bronchitis.

Even though coughing can be uncomfortable and painful, it is actually helpful for ridding the lungs of excess mucus. If you are diagnosed with chronic bronchitis, your care provider might recommend you continue clearing your airways with coughing rather than prescribe antibiotics. Antibiotics will typically only be prescribed for other bacterial infections worsening symptoms. The most successful treatment for chronic bronchitis, however, is smoking cessation.

Knowing what to watch out for will help you to avoid cases of acute bronchitis and treat chronic bronchitis, if you have it.

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