

# Acute Bronchitis in Children, Adolescents, and Adults

## Key points

- More than 90% of acute cough illnesses are non-bacterial
- Multiple studies show that patients with acute bronchitis do not benefit from antibiotic therapy
- Symptoms may last up to 3 weeks
- Evaluation should focus on excluding pneumonia or other severe disease
- Purulent green or yellow sputum alone is not predictive of bacterial infection

## Possible signs and symptoms of acute bronchitis ("chest cold"):

- Productive cough (may be dry the first few days)
- Chest soreness
- Wheezing
- Fatigue
- Mild headache
- Mild body aches
- Low-grade fever (less than 102°F)

\*\*Acute exacerbation of COPD not covered in this guideline\*\*

## Differential diagnosis:

- Non-specific URI
- Asthma
- Community-acquired pneumonia
- Acute exacerbation of COPD
- Post-nasal drip

Clinical picture consistent with acute bronchitis

## Any of the following present? (may suggest pneumonia)

- Ill-appearing
- High fever or other constitutional symptoms
- Tachypnea
- Tachycardia
- Evidence of lung consolidation on physical exam

Yes

No

Chest X-ray  
(if available)

Infiltrate

No infiltrate

Uncomplicated acute bronchitis likely\*

Refer to guideline for  
community-acquired  
pneumonia

## Antibiotic therapy not indicated\*

### Recommend specific symptomatic therapy:

#### Children

- Encourage fluids
- Fever control (acetaminophen or NSAIDs)

#### Adults

- Bronchodilator ( $\beta$ -agonist) therapy shortens the duration of cough
- Dextromethorphan or codeine for cough
- Acetaminophen or NSAIDs for fever/pain

### Implement communication tips from page 1

**Disclaimer:** This is intended only as a guide for evidence-based decision-making; it is not intended to replace clinical judgment

**References:** <http://www.cdc.gov/getsmart/campaign-materials/info-sheets/adult-acute-cough-illness.html> (accessed 12/30/09); *Ann Intern Med* 2000; 133:981-991

\*If pertussis or influenza are suspected clinically, initiate diagnostic testing and consider empiric therapy