

Family Medicine Clerkship Plain Language Summary

Title: Do I need antibiotics if I have Acute Bronchitis?

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Plain Language Summary:

What is Acute Bronchitis?

Acute means something that happened recently, and usually will go away soon. And Bronchitis means that the tubes that carry air to the lungs are inflamed and irritated. Those tubes can become irritated when different bugs like viruses and bacteria get inside and don't want to leave. It usually happens several days after you have a cold. Your tubes get swollen and this makes it hard to breathe and you may have a cough. Sometimes you may cough up different "stuff" of green, yellow, or white color. You may also feel tired and hot.

How do I know if I have Acute Bronchitis?

Your doctor will usually tell you. If you have symptoms described above, go and see your doctor. He or she may listen to your chest, get a little blood sample, and take a picture of your lungs in order to make sure you don't have a more serious illness called pneumonia, which is irritation of your lungs.

Can my doctor give me some medication (antibiotics) to treat this Acute Bronchitis?

Yes and No. Usually medication is not very helpful. If it does help, it is just a little, and you would not even tell a difference. Medications can also be bad for you. They may cause your tummy to ache, have you go to the bathroom all the time, and cost quite a bit of money. They may also be very dangerous if you happen to be "allergic" to them. Having an allergy to a medication means feeling very ill after taking it.

Sometimes, if you feel very sick, have a temperature, and your doctor may think you have a bacterial infection (bacteria causing your air tubes to be irritated); you may start taking medications called antibiotics. Antibiotics are only good for bacteria and do not work for viruses. It is hard to tell if you have a virus or a bacterium that causes your air tubes to be irritated. And sometimes the only way we can tell is by waiting and seeing what happens next.

What can I do at home to help me feel better?

Drinking plenty of fluids and avoiding spicy foods help with the cough. There are also medicines one can buy without a doctor's note to help with high temperature and cough. You should take them only as instructed.

A few other things you can do to help speed up the healing is to drink less coffee, not smoke or be around anyone who smokes. Breathing moist air from a machine that makes vapor, called humidifier, may help you breathe better.

What should I do if I feel worse?

If time, discussed by your doctor, has passed and you do not feel better or you feel worse, you may have a bug that is hard to get rid of. You also may start developing irritation of the lungs that we call pneumonia. You should go back and see your doctor again or go to

the urgent care or emergency room if you feel really ill and cannot get an appointment with your doctor or you cannot wait.

Additional Resources:

For more information:

US National Library of Medicine:

<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmedhealth/PMH0002078/>

Medline Plus:

<http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/acutebronchitis.html>

Web MD:

<http://www.webmd.com/lung/tc/acute-bronchitis-topic-overview>

Key Words:

Acute Bronchitis

Productive Cough

Upper Respiratory Infection

Antibiotic Therapy

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