

# What is Bronchiolitis?

FACT SHEET prepared by the Asthma and Respiratory Foundation NZ

**Bronchiolitis is a common illness usually caused by a viral respiratory infection which leads to breathing problems in babies and children less than one year of age. It affects the smallest airways (bronchioles) in the lungs and is most common in winter and spring.**

## What causes Bronchiolitis?

The disease is usually caused by a viral infection. Many viruses can cause the illness. The most common is the Respiratory Syncytial Virus (RSV). Premature babies and babies with heart or lung disease have a higher risk of developing severe Bronchiolitis.

## How does my baby get bronchiolitis?

Bronchiolitis is very contagious, so it is sensible to keep babies away from people with coughs and colds. If your baby has bronchiolitis, keep them away from other children to stop the spread of the disease. Encourage everyone in your home to carefully wash and dry their hands to help stop the spread of the infection, especially before and after handling baby. Babies who are breast-fed and those who live in a smoke-free home that is warm and well insulated, are less likely to get Bronchiolitis.

## What are some of the symptoms of bronchiolitis?

Bronchiolitis often starts as cold with a runny nose and can last for several days and usually the second or third day is the worst. The baby usually has a fever for two to three days and may have a cough, breathe fast and wheeze. The cough may last from ten days up to one month.

## How is bronchiolitis treated?

Most babies do not require any special medical treatment and will get better by themselves. The illness is caused by a virus, so antibiotics and asthma medicines are not usually effective. Most babies can be looked after at home if they are feeding well and not having any problems with breathing.

## How can I care for my child at home?

- Offer small feeds of breast milk or infant formula regularly
- Keep your baby warm but not too hot
- Try to stay at home if you can so your baby is not exposed to too many temperature fluctuations
- Give your baby as much rest as possible
- Don't smoke in the house or around your baby
- Keep your baby's nose clear. If it is blocked or crusty you can use saline nose drops (can be purchased from a pharmacy). This will also help when feeding baby.

## When should I take my baby to see the doctor?

If your baby is unwell and coughing it is important to see your doctor for a check to see if it is bronchiolitis or if there is something else causing the cough.

### **What will my doctor do?**

Your doctor will talk with you about your baby's symptoms and listen to his/her breathing. He/she will check that your baby is drinking enough and may ask you to come back in 24 hours to check that baby is improving and not getting sicker. However, you and baby may be referred to hospital so that baby can receive oxygen or extra fluids.

### **When should I get urgent help?**

See your GP (general practitioner) or go to an after-hours medical centre urgently if you are worried about your baby or if your baby:

- Is under three months
- Is breathing quickly, has noisy breathing and is having to use extra effort to breathe
- Looks unwell or very pale
- Is taking less than half of their normal feeds
- Is vomiting
- Has not wet a nappy for six hours
- Is getting worse

Even if you've already seen your doctor if your baby's breathing difficulties get worse or you are worried take your baby back for checking.

### **When should I seek emergency help?**

Dial 111 for urgent help if your child has any of the following:

- Stops breathing
- Has severe difficulty breathing or has periods of stopping breathing
- Has blue lips or tongue is becoming very sleepy
- Difficult to wake and/or is floppy and very pale

### **Does bronchiolitis cause asthma?**

It is very hard to know for sure that a very young child has asthma. Most children who start wheezing in the first two years of life do not go on to have asthma, though it is thought that an infection with RSV may be a risk factor for later development of asthma.

### **The Asthma and Respiratory Foundation NZ can help you**

The Asthma and Respiratory Foundation NZ is New Zealand's not-for-profit sector authority on asthma and other respiratory illnesses. We advocate to government and raise awareness of respiratory illnesses, fund research for better treatments and educate on **BEST** practice.

Check out our comprehensive website at [asthmaandrespiratory.org.nz](http://asthmaandrespiratory.org.nz)

The Asthma and Respiratory Foundation NZ would like to acknowledge the Paediatric Society of New Zealand and the Starship Foundation for the information contained in this fact sheet. Check out the website [kidshealth.org.nz](http://kidshealth.org.nz)