

# Fact Sheet

## Bronchiolitis



Bronchiolitis is a chest infection caused by a virus - most commonly respiratory syncytial virus (RSV). It often occurs in babies during the first year of life and it usually happens in winter. It is the most common reason for admission to hospital in infants during the first 12 months. The virus infects the small breathing tubes (bronchioles) of the lungs; this causes them to become narrowed by mucus and inflammation.

Generally, the baby first develops symptoms of a cold, such as a runny nose, a cough and fever. Over the next day or so, the coughing may become worse and there may be a wheezing sound heard when the baby breathes out. Sometimes the baby finds it hard to breathe and does not feed or sleep well. Your baby may look as if they have asthma.

The wheezing sound, if present, usually lasts for two to three days. As the wheezing settles, the baby gradually improves. However, the cough may last up to a month.

### Home management

Because this is a viral infection, antibiotics will not help.

Sometimes, other medication such as Ventolin™, Atrovent™ or Bricanyl™ may be prescribed to open up the airways and settle the wheezing, but these may not be effective in babies under 6 - 12 months of age.

Your baby may need extra fluids. Give an extra bottle or two per day, and give more frequent breastfeeds. As feeding may be difficult, offer smaller feeds but more often.

### When to see your doctor

#### Poor fluid intake

An easy way to tell if your child is not taking enough fluids is to check their nappies. If there are fewer wet nappies than usual, it probably means that your child is not getting enough fluid. If he/she is refusing to feed, having difficulty feeding or fewer wet nappies consult your doctor.

#### Worsening cough and wheeze

If your baby's breathing becomes more difficult, or your child looks tired and listless, is not sleeping or if there is any blueness around the lips, *seek help immediately*. Some babies do need to be admitted to hospital for support such as oxygen and fluids.

Most babies with bronchiolitis can be managed at home, and they get better within a week to ten days.

### Will it happen again?

Maybe. It is possible to have bronchiolitis again, but most babies will only have it once. Wheezing may occur again with other viral infections or your child may develop asthma. If a wheeze occurs often you should consult your doctor as further assessment or more definitive treatment may be needed.

### Does it cause future problems?

Some children who have severe or recurrent bronchiolitis may eventually develop asthma. It is not clear whether the virus causes asthma or whether symptoms are more severe in children who may have inherited the tendency to develop asthma.

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### Remember

- Bronchiolitis gets better in a week to ten days.
- It is a viral infection, so medications, especially antibiotics, may not help.
- Your baby may need extra fluid, offer small frequent feeds or frequent breast feeds
- Consult your doctor if your child has difficulty with breathing, feeding or sleeping.
- Some children develop asthma after having bronchiolitis.

This fact sheet is for education purposes only.  
Please consult with your doctor or other health professional  
to make sure this information is right for your child.

*This document was reviewed on 23<sup>rd</sup> December 2009.*

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