

Bronchiolitis

Bronchiolitis is a respiratory illness that primarily affects infants and young children, typically from birth to 2 years of age, with the average age being 6 months. It is a lower respiratory tract infection that causes inflammation in the bronchioles, which are the smallest air passages in the lungs. Bronchiolitis is caused by a viral infection, most commonly the respiratory syncytial virus (RSV), which is highly contagious and easily spreads through coughing and sneezing. Other viruses such as influenza, parainfluenza and rhinovirus can also cause bronchiolitis.

Symptoms of bronchiolitis usually start out as mild cold-like symptoms such as a runny nose and a cough. However, over time, the cough may become more severe and persistent. The cough can frequently sound wet like a “smoker’s hacking cough”, or can sound like a tight wheezy cough. Wheezing is a high pitched breathing sound heard mostly on expiration.

There are several risk factors that can increase the likelihood of a child developing bronchiolitis. These include being born prematurely, having a weakened immune system, exposure to tobacco smoke, and having a family history of asthma or allergies. Additionally, infants who attend daycare or have older siblings are at higher risk of contracting the virus.

Treatment for bronchiolitis is primarily supportive, as there is no cure for the underlying viral infection. Over-the-counter medications such as acetaminophen or ibuprofen can help relieve fever and discomfort, while humidified air or saline nasal drops may help loosen mucus and ease breathing. In severe cases, hospitalization may be necessary, particularly if the child is having difficulty breathing or maintaining oxygen levels. Most children with bronchiolitis will simply have a cough that persists in some form for upwards of 2 weeks before it resolves.

Prevention is the best approach to managing bronchiolitis. This includes frequent hand washing, avoiding close contact with sick individuals, and ensuring that infants receive all recommended vaccinations, particularly the RSV vaccine. Additionally, those who are at higher risk of developing severe bronchiolitis, such as premature infants or those with underlying health conditions, may be eligible for prophylactic treatment with medications such as palivizumab.

In conclusion, bronchiolitis is a common respiratory illness that affects infants and young children. It is caused by a viral infection, primarily RSV, and can cause severe symptoms such as wheezing, difficulty breathing, and fever. Treatment is primarily supportive, and prevention is key to managing the illness. Parents should be vigilant in protecting their infants from exposure to the virus and seek medical attention if their child exhibits severe symptoms.