

## **i** Information about bronchiolitis for parents and carers

### What is bronchiolitis?

Bronchiolitis is when the tiniest air passages in your baby's lungs become swollen. This can make it more difficult for your baby to breathe. Usually, bronchiolitis is caused by a virus called respiratory syncytial virus (known as RSV).

Almost all children will have had an infection caused by RSV by the time they are two. It is most common in the winter months and usually only causes mild 'cold-like' symptoms. Most children get better on their own.

Some babies, especially very young ones, can have difficulty with breathing or feeding and may need to go to hospital.

### Can I prevent bronchiolitis?

No. The virus that causes bronchiolitis in babies also causes coughs and colds in older children and adults so it is very difficult to prevent.

### What are the symptoms?

- Bronchiolitis starts like a simple cold. Your baby may have a runny nose and sometimes a temperature and a cough.
- After a few days your baby's cough may become worse.
- Your baby's breathing may be faster than normal and it may become noisy. He or she may need to make more effort to breathe.
- Sometimes, in very young babies, bronchiolitis may cause them to have brief pauses in their breathing.
- As breathing becomes more difficult, your baby may not be able to take the usual amount of milk by breast or bottle. You may notice fewer wet nappies than usual.
- Your baby may be sick after feeding and become irritable.

### How can I help my baby?

- If feeding is difficult, try breastfeeding more often or offering smaller bottle feeds more often.
- If your baby has a temperature, you can give him or her paracetamol (for example, Calpol or Disprol). You must follow the instructions that come with the paracetamol carefully. If you are not sure, ask your community pharmacist if paracetamol is suitable for your baby, and what dose you should give.
- If your baby is already taking any medicines or inhalers, you should carry on using these. If you find it difficult to get your baby to take them, ask your doctor for advice.
- Bronchiolitis is caused by a virus so antibiotics won't help.

Make sure your baby is not exposed to tobacco smoke. Passive smoking can seriously damage your baby's health. It makes breathing problems like bronchiolitis worse.

### How long does bronchiolitis last?

- Most babies with bronchiolitis get better within about two weeks. They may still have a cough for a few more weeks.
- Your baby can go back to nursery or daycare as soon as he or she is well enough (that is feeding normally and with no difficulty breathing).
- There is usually no need to see your doctor if your baby is recovering well. If you are worried about your baby's progress, discuss this with your doctor or health visitor.

### When should I get advice?

Contact your GP if :

- you are worried about your baby;
- your baby is having difficulty breathing;
- your baby is taking less than half his or her usual feeds over two to three feeds, or has no wet nappy for 12 hours;
- your baby has a high temperature; or
- your baby seems very tired or irritable.

### Dial 999 for an ambulance if:

Your baby is having a lot of difficulty breathing and is pale or sweaty;

Your baby's tongue and lips are turning blue; or

There are long pauses in your baby's breathing.

### What will happen if I have to take my baby to hospital?

- At hospital, a doctor or nurse will examine your baby.
- The doctor or nurse will check your baby's breathing using a special machine called a pulse oximeter. This is a light-probe which will usually be wrapped around your baby's finger or toe. It measures the oxygen in your baby's blood, and helps doctors and nurses to assess your baby's breathing.
- If your baby needs oxygen, it will be given through fine tubes into the nose or through a mask.
- If your baby needs help to breathe or feed, he or she may need to stay in hospital.
- You will be able to stay with your baby while he or she is in hospital.

- Your baby will probably only need to stay in hospital for a few days. You will be able to take your baby home when he or she is able to feed and doesn't need oxygen any more.
- To confirm the cause of the bronchiolitis, some of the mucus from your baby's nose may be tested for RSV. In hospital, it is important to separate babies with and without the virus to stop the virus spreading.
- You will need to clean your hands with alcohol gel or wash and dry them carefully before and after caring for your baby.
- Visitors may be restricted to prevent the spread of infection.
- If your baby needs help with feeding, he or she may be given milk through a feeding tube. This is a small plastic tube which is passed through your baby's nose or mouth and down into his or her stomach. It is kept in place by taping the tube to your baby's cheek. The tube will be removed when your baby is able to feed again.
- Some babies may need to be given fluids through a drip to make sure they are getting enough fluids.
- A few babies become seriously ill and need to go into intensive care (perhaps in a different hospital) for specialist help with their breathing.

### After leaving hospital

Remember, you can ask your GP or health visitor for advice or contact them if you become worried about your baby.

### Will it happen again?

Your baby is not likely to get bronchiolitis again, although occasionally it can happen.

### Are there any long-term effects?

Your baby may still have a cough and remain chesty and wheezy for some time but this will settle down gradually.

Bronchiolitis does not usually cause long-term breathing problems.

### Useful contacts

#### NHS 24

Phone: 08454 242424 • [www.nhs24.com](http://www.nhs24.com)  
Provides health advice and information.