

Another “bronch” to know

You’ve likely heard of bronchitis, an illness that impacts the larger lung airways and leaves you feeling short of breath and just generally yucky.

This winter, here’s another respiratory illness with “bronch” in the name to be aware of, especially if you have young kids: bronchiolitis. It’s an ailment that [Awad Alyami, MD](#), an OSF HealthCare pediatrician, sees often this time of year.

The basics

Dr. Alyami says bronchiolitis is an infection of the bronchioles, or the small airways that branch out in the lungs.

“When they become infected, there is a lot of mucus. It makes it harder to breathe,” Dr. Alyami explains.

Other symptoms include fever, runny nose, cough and dehydration. Bronchiolitis is “easily spread,” Dr. Alyami says, through respiratory droplets, like when you cough. The illness is most common in children, especially kids under two. Other high-risk groups include babies born prematurely, with chronic lung disease, with heart disease present at birth and with immune system deficiencies.

“There are also environmental risk factors, like babies who are exposed to smoke and babies who attend day care,” Dr. Alyami adds. Attending day care, he explains, will expose a child to illnesses, no matter how clean the place is.

Cause, diagnosis and treatment

Dr. Alyami says other viruses like influenza and COVID-19 can cause bronchiolitis, but respiratory syncytial virus (RSV) is the most common cause.

“You need to see a doctor if your baby has trouble breathing at any time,” Dr. Alyami advises. “Or if your baby is younger than three months and they have a fever. Or if they are older than three months and they have a fever for more than three days. Or if the child has signs of dehydration, like if they are making fewer wet diapers than normal.”

Unlike the flu and COVID-19, there is no test for bronchiolitis. But, a health care provider may swab your nose anyway to see if you have another virus. Other tests like a chest x-ray may be done. And the provider will also examine you and ask about your health history to come up with a diagnosis.

Treatment involves making you feel comfortable until symptoms resolve.

“One of the most important things is nose suction as needed,” Dr. Alyami says. “When we suction the nose and keep it clean, it’s easier to breathe.”

A bulb suction is the most common device to do this. When you’re really stuffed up, you can use nasal spray or drops to make the secretion thinner. Then, use the suction. You can also use a humidifier if your home’s air is dry. Dr. Alyami says these devices and medicines are widely available in retail stores.

You can treat the fever with over-the-counter medication. Drink fluids to stay hydrated.

“Typically, day three to day five are the peak of symptoms,” Dr. Alyami says. “After five days, they start to improve. Symptoms can last seven to 14 days. And typically, the cough lingers for a little longer.”

In serious cases, your child may have low oxygen and need to be admitted to the hospital. There, doctors will use an oxygen tube inserted into the nostrils to help breathing. In rare cases, a doctor will put a breathing tube down the child’s throat.

Prevention

Want your child to avoid all this? Preach healthy habits, especially in fall and winter when respiratory illnesses peak. Wash your hands thoroughly. Cough and sneeze into your elbow or a tissue. If you’re sick, stay away from others.

Dr. Alyami adds that since RSV is the main cause of bronchiolitis, you should look into the RSV vaccine. This cold weather season, the vaccine is available for certain groups, like older adults, infants and pregnant women. Talk to your primary care provider if you have questions.