

Patient information from BMJ

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Bronchiectasis: what is it?

Bronchiectasis is a lung disease that causes breathing problems and makes chest infections more likely. There is no cure for bronchiectasis, but treatments can help you cope with the symptoms.

What is bronchiectasis?

If you have bronchiectasis, some of the airways in your lungs are too wide. This usually happens because the walls of the airways have been damaged. When the airways are too wide, mucus builds up inside them.

When you have a lot of mucus in your lungs you may find it hard to cough it all out. The mucus that gets left behind can be infected by bacteria. This can cause a chest infection.

Most people who have bronchiectasis have a condition called **cystic fibrosis**. Cystic fibrosis is an inherited condition. People with this condition are usually diagnosed when they are babies or young children.

Some people with bronchiectasis have other inherited conditions such as alpha-1 antitrypsin deficiency, a condition that can cause problems with the lungs and liver.

Adults who get bronchiectasis might get it after an infection, such as measles or tuberculosis (TB), or after breathing in a harmful chemical.

What are the symptoms?

The main symptom of bronchiectasis is coughing up a lot of mucus (also called sputum). You might cough up as much as half a litre (one pint) of mucus in a day. You might also:

- feel breathless
- wheeze
- get very tired, and
- cough up blood.

These symptoms can be alarming and can make you feel unwell. If you have a child with bronchiectasis it can be especially distressing to watch this happening to them.

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If you or your child has symptoms that seem worse than usual you should talk to your doctor straight away.

What will happen?

It's hard to say what will happen to you as an individual. Bronchiectasis doesn't go away, and some people get more symptoms than others.

Treatments can help you cope with the symptoms and improve how well your lungs work. To learn more, see the leaflet *Bronchiectasis: what treatments work?*

If you get a chest infection it may make your symptoms worse for a few days or weeks. This is sometimes called an **exacerbation**.

Most people get exacerbations once or twice a year. But if you have severe bronchiectasis you could have six or more exacerbations a year.

If you get your infections treated quickly, and you can cough up mucus, you will probably be able to live with your condition quite normally.

Some people get very bad bronchiectasis. This can sometimes be life threatening for older people. This is because having difficulty breathing can put a strain on the rest of your body, including your heart.

Where to get more help

It can be hard to live with a lung disease like bronchiectasis. If you'd like to be put in touch with other people who have the disease, or other parents whose children have it, there might be charities or support groups near you that can help.

For example, in the UK, Breathe Easy might be able to help. It is part of the British Lung Foundation (blf.org.uk). Or you could try the Cystic Fibrosis Trust (cysticfibrosis.org.uk).

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