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Bronchiolitis: Information for family members

What is bronchiolitis?

Bronchiolitis is an infection of the small air passages in the lung, usually caused by a virus. Many viruses can cause bronchiolitis, but RSV (respiratory syncytial virus) is the most common virus each winter. Almost all children eventually are infected with RSV. It is spread by person-to-person contact: sneezing, coughing, hand-to-nose or hand-to-hand contact. The same virus may cause a "cold" in older children and adults.

What to expect?

Bronchiolitis usually lasts for two weeks, but can last longer. Often symptoms get worse in the first three to five days of the illness, then slowly get better.

Common symptoms:

- Noisy breathing or wheezing
- Cough
- Faster breathing than usual
- Runny nose and congestion
- Difficulty drinking as much as usual

Treatment:

There is no special medicine that will make your baby get better faster. Antibiotics aren't helpful for viral infections such as bronchiolitis, unless there is also another bacterial infection present. Cold medicines aren't helpful, and can be dangerous in young infants. Some things that may help make your child feel better:

- Use salt water drops to loosen mucus in the nose and suction before feeding, or when your baby's congestion is worse.
- Use a cool mist vaporizer or humidifier to help loosen mucus.
- Feed your baby smaller amounts, but more often; some babies with bronchiolitis need to feed every one or two hours.
- In a small number of babies, a medicine that the baby breathes into the lungs may make him or her more comfortable (albuterol). If your pediatrician prescribed this medicine, use it every four to six hours as needed.

Call your child's pediatrician or nurse practitioner if he or she develops any of the following symptoms:

Symptoms of respiratory distress

- Your child's nostrils flare (move in and out) with each breath
- Your child is breathing more than 70 times per minute
- You can see tugging between the ribs when breathing
- Working to breathe prevents your child from feeding
- Your child has bluish lips

Symptoms of dehydration

- No wet diapers (there should be at least three per day)
- Dry gums and tongue
- More fussy than usual, and won't calm down
- Increased sleepiness
- Your child cannot drink or refuses to drink