Bronchitis and Emphysema - 20 questions and the answers

1. What is chronic bronchitis?

Chronic bronchitis is a disease of the air passages in the lungs - which are known as bronchi - and is a longstanding health problem. The bronchi become damaged and narrowed, and produce an excess of sputum (phlegm) which has to be coughed up. The characteristic symptoms of chronic bronchitis are persistent cough, producing sputum, and breathlessness. The sputum is usually white or grey and frothy.

2. What is acute bronchitis?

Acute bronchitis is a short, sharp infection of the bronchi, which often follows a head cold or influenza. The patient may be ill and feverish, and may cough up thick green or yellow sputum. Acute bronchitis can occur in normally healthy chests and will usually clear up without treatment, but recovery is hastened by an antibiotic. It is a more prolonged and troublesome illness in the chest of the person suffering from chronic bronchitis.
3 What is emphysema?

Emphysema is a long-standing chest disease in which lung tissue itself, rather than the bronchi, is damaged. The lung tissue is responsible for transferring oxygen from the air we breathe to the blood, and is normally like a fine sponge of air sacs. In emphysema, the sponge is damaged and tatty and is less efficient at getting oxygen into the blood.

4 What causes chronic bronchitis and emphysema?

Tobacco smoke is the main culprit. Chronic bronchitis is uncommon in those who have never smoked unless there is some other factor such as working in a damp, dusty or polluted environment. In the past, air pollution undoubtedly played a part, but this is not an important problem nowadays.

The causes of emphysema are less clear but, without doubt, smoking is an important contributory cause. Neither chronic bronchitis nor emphysema is caused by infection nor are they infectious.

5 Can chronic bronchitis and emphysema be cured?

No, but this does not mean that nothing can be done to help. When the lungs or bronchi have been damaged, they cannot be made normal again. However, some of the following answers describe how the damage and symptoms can be kept to a minimum.

6 What can the doctor do to help?

The doctor provides support, advice and treatment. He may prescribe a linctus for a dry, useless cough, and expectorant for sticky phlegm or a bronchodilator for breathlessness. A bronchodilator is a medicine which eases breathlessness by getting rid of spasm in the bronchi. Spasm can cause narrowing of bronchial tubes in bronchitis as it does in asthma. The bronchodilator can be taken in the form of tablets or through an inhaler. If it is inhaled, the patient should ask the doctor to check that he is using the inhaler correctly.

7 What can the patient do to help himself?

First, his attitude, determination and optimism are most important. Ideally, the approach to his illness should be, 'I know I have some lung damage but I am going to get the most our of life in spite of it'. Second, it is vital that he should give up smoking; it is never too late to benefit from abandoning the habit. Third, he should avoid, as far as he can, catching an infection, such as a cold or influenza,
which may lead to acute bronchitis. Fourth, if he is overweight, he should diet to lose weight.

8 What is the best way to give up smoking?
There is no easy way to stop this dangerous habit. It is essential that the smoker himself decides to give it up because he knows that he will benefit by stopping. From then on it is a question of will-power; and his family and friends should do all they can to encourage him. Although cutting down the number of cigarettes smoked each day is helpful, giving up is better. Five cigarettes a day are safer than twenty, but none is much safer than five.

9 Can chest infections be avoided?
It may be possible to prevent colds, influenza and acute bronchitis by avoiding crowded public places, particularly in bad weather. Unfortunately this is not always feasible, especially for the person who has to travel to work. Anti-influenza vaccination is recommended for most patients with chronic chest disease. It is given each autumn by the family doctor. It does not protect against all infections but only against true influenza.

10 How should acute bronchitis be treated in a chronic bronchitic?
The person with chronic bronchitis or emphysema should have a course of antibiotic promptly when he develops acute bronchitis. If he gets a head cold or influenza, he should start antibiotic treatment as soon as the colour of his sputum (phlegm) changes to yellow or green. Indeed, his doctor may prescribe a course of antibiotic tablets to be kept at home in case he has an attack of acute bronchitis. The tablets can then be started without delay when the chest infection develops. Home physiotherapy may also be helpful — see the answer to the next question.

11 What is the role of chest physiotherapy in the treatment of chest illness?
Many chest patients have a lot of sputum or have difficulty in clearing sticky sputum. The physiotherapist has several methods for helping people to clear their lungs, including tipping which just means lying in certain positions on the bed. The patient can be taught these methods in the local physiotherapy department so that he can practise them at home.
What is The Chest, Heart and Stroke Association?

The CHSA works for the prevention of chest, heart and stroke illnesses and to provide sympathetic and practical help for those who suffer from them and for their families. This is done by a continuous programme of health education, rehabilitation, advice and welfare services.

It sponsors research into stroke and chest disease but more funds are urgently needed to prevent these diseases and improve the quality of life for sufferers.

The CHSA is a voluntary organisation and its work is funded entirely through the generosity of the general public. Chest disease, heart disease and stroke will kill nearly 60% of us. You can help us beat them now - any donation however small is welcome.

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* B2 BCG: Protection against Tuberculosis
   A leaflet for parents and children which explains what BCG vaccination is and why it is strongly advised.
B4 A certificate of BCG vaccination with a short explanation of any possible after effects on the reverse side.
* C1 Bronchitis and Emphysema - 20 questions and the answers
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C2 Coming to terms with Chronic Bronchitis and Emphysema
C3 Coping with the problems of Chronic Chest Disease
C4 What is Bronchiectasis?

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Modern Drug Treatment in Tuberculosis (seventh edition 1990)

For comprehensive list of publications on chest, heart and stroke write to CHSA:
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