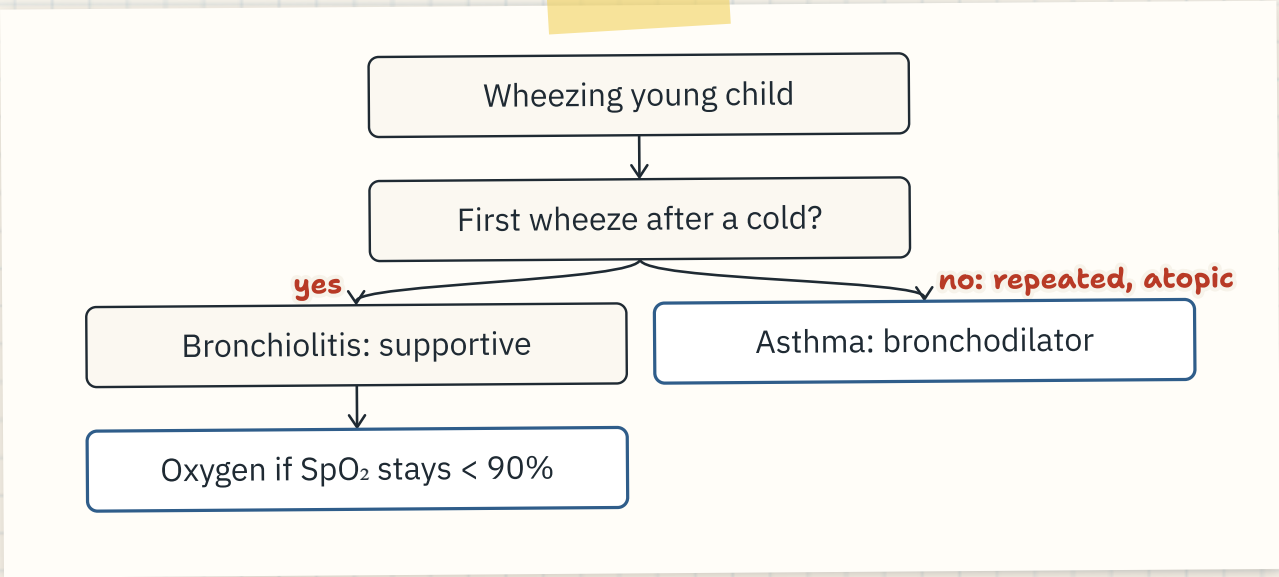
Bronchiolitis vs asthma

Supportive care or a bronchodilator?



Step by step

1. Is it a first wheeze after a cold, under 24 months?
2. Check for repeated wheeze, eczema, parental asthma
3. Bronchiolitis: hydrate; oxygen if SpO_2 stays below 90%
4. Asthma: short-acting bronchodilator reliever

	Bronchiolitis	Asthma
Pattern	First wheeze after a cold	Repeated, atopic
Background	Under 24 months; RSV, winter	Eczema or family history
Blockage	Oedema and debris	Reversible bronchoconstriction
Treatment	Supportive; no bronchodilator	Reliever; inhaled steroid if frequent

Two children, one wheeze

Rule of thumb

First wheeze plus a cold = bronchiolitis

Repeated wheeze plus eczema or family history = asthma

Oedema and debris do not respond to a bronchodilator

Exam traps

- ! No bronchodilator, epinephrine or steroid for routine bronchiolitis (AAP 2014).
- ! No antibiotics unless a bacterial infection is present.
- ! Oxygen only if saturation stays persistently below 90%.

Bronchiolitis vs asthma in young children
Video, written lesson, practice question and sources: medservatory.com/usmle-step-2-ck/paediatrics/bronchiolitis-vs-asthma-infant

For exam study only, not medical advice. Follow local guidelines and your lab's ranges.
© 2026 Medservatory, a project of ADMR Solutions Ltd. Free to print and share for personal study.