

# Coughs

**The common cold, allergy and cigarette smoke are common causes of coughing, but a cough can also be a symptom of a serious illness or a side effect of a medicine. Treatment for a cough depends on its cause.**

Coughing is a normal reflex to protect and clean our airways (respiratory tract). Coughing clears irritating material (e.g., smoke or dust) and excess secretions (mucus, sputum, phlegm) from our throat, air passages and lungs. The sound and pattern of a cough depends on its cause.

## **Causes of coughing**

Cough is a symptom of a range of medical conditions and sometimes a person may have more than one reason for coughing.

Causes of coughing include:

- Post nasal drip (catarrh) – excess nasal secretions which run down into the back of the throat. Often caused by allergy, common colds or sinus infection



- Asthma
- Respiratory tract infections (e.g., colds, bronchitis, croup, whooping cough, pneumonia)
- Inhaled irritants (e.g., cigarette smoke, dust, fumes, a foreign body)
- Lung disease (e.g., cystic fibrosis, COPD, cancer)
- Gastroesophageal reflux (heartburn) – stomach acid rises up into the oesophagus and triggers coughing

- Heart failure
- Anxiety and habit
- Some medicines (e.g. ACE inhibitors, beta-blockers, non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs).

## Types of cough

A cough can be described by its sound, pattern and feel, and whether or not it brings up mucus from the airways.

- A **wet cough** brings up mucus. With a wet cough your chest is tight or has rattles, and you may feel congested (airways blocked with mucus) and breathless. A wet cough is a useful cough, helping to clear mucus from your airways. The colour, smell and appearance of the mucus can be an important clue to the cause of the cough.
- A **dry cough** does not bring up mucus. It is often triggered by a tickle or irritation in your throat. Your chest does not feel or sound congested.

Sometimes coughing can be connected with a certain activity (e.g., exercise, eating, posture), situation or time of day. Take notice of when and how a cough starts and how long it lasts.

A cough may be only one of your symptoms. Watch for any other signs of illness or discomfort (e.g., allergy, pain, wheezing).

By describing your cough, you can help a doctor or pharmacist to choose the best treatment for you.

## Problems caused by coughing

Coughing can cause sore chest muscles, a hoarse voice, tiredness, wheezing and headache. Some people have trouble with 'leaking' urine when they cough. A continual cough can interfere with concentration, talking, exercise and sleep.

Coughing can also spread infection. The micro-organisms (e.g. virus, bacteria) that cause infections can be in the droplets of moisture that are 'coughed out' during coughing

## Cough medicines

Coughing caused by allergy or a common cold can often be relieved by non-prescription medicines. The best medicine for a cough depends on the type and cause of the cough. Remember that cough and cold medicines must not be given to children under two years of age. Always ask a pharmacist or doctor for advice, especially about medicines for children.

Non-prescription medicines that can help relieve coughing include:

For a wet cough

- **Mucolytics** (e.g. bromhexine) can thin mucus, making the mucus easier to cough up. Mucolytics may help a wet cough to bring up more mucus and clear the chest.
- **Expectorants** (e.g. guaiphenesin, senega, ammonia) can loosen mucus, making the mucus easier to cough up. Expectorants may help a wet cough to bring up more mucus and clear the chest.

For a dry cough

- **Cough suppressants** (e.g. dextromethorphan, pholcodine) can suppress (stop) the cough reflex and may relieve a dry cough. Cough suppressants are not suitable for a wet cough, or a cough caused by asthma or airways disease.
- **Antihistamines** (anti-allergy medicines) may help relieve a dry cough caused by allergy. Some antihistamines may also stop a cough caused by post nasal drip, as they reduce nasal secretions. Antihistamines are not suitable for a wet cough.

## Self care

- Take notice of the type and pattern of your cough.
- Always cover your mouth when coughing, preferably with a tissue or the bend of your elbow, not your hand. Turn your head away from food and others. This will help to stop infection spreading.
- After coughing up mucus, discard it in a tissue. Do not swallow it.
- Stop a bout of coughing by sipping water or sucking lozenges. Do not give lozenges to young children.
- Have steam inhalations (or hot showers) to loosen mucus.
- Wash your hands well after covering a cough and also before eating, preparing food or caring for others. If washing facilities are not available, an alcohol based hand sanitiser may be used.

## Important

Seek medical advice about your cough if:

- You are coughing up blood or green, yellow, brown or rust coloured mucus
- It causes severe pain, fainting, vomiting or exhaustion
- It is mainly at night
- It has changed
- You also have a fever, rash, weight loss, sinus pain or generally feel unwell
- You are wheezy, short of breath or have chest pain or pain when breathing in
- It lasts more than three weeks (or one week for a child) or regularly returns

Any child under five years of age with a cough needs to be seen by a doctor as soon as possible.

- Don't smoke.
- Get plenty of rest and relaxation, especially if unwell.
- Eat regular, healthy meals, including plenty of fruit, vegetables and grains. Limit foods high in fat, sugar or salt.
- Drink enough water every day to satisfy your thirst and to keep your urine 'light-coloured'. (unless a doctor advises not to).
- If you lose urine when you cough, try wearing 'panty liners' or incontinence pads for protection. Regular pelvic floor exercises can improve bladder control.

## For more information

### Healthdirect Australia

Phone: 1800 022 222

Website: [www.healthinsite.gov.au](http://www.healthinsite.gov.au)

### Consumer Medicine Information (CMI)

Your pharmacist can advise on CMI leaflets.

### National Prescribing Service (NPS) Medicines Information

Phone: 1300 MEDICINE (1300 633 424)

Website: [www.nps.org.au](http://www.nps.org.au)

### The Poisons Information Centre

In case of poisoning phone 13 11 26 from anywhere in Australia.

*Pharmacists are medicines experts.  
Ask a pharmacist for advice when choosing a medicine.*

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