

# 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 number of medical conditions. Sometimes a person may have more than one reason for coughing.

Causes of coughing include:

- post-nasal drip – mucus from the nose and sinuses runs down 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 object)
- lung disease (e.g. cystic fibrosis, chronic bronchitis, cancer)
- gastro-esophageal reflux (heartburn) – stomach acid rises up into the oesophagus and causes coughing
- heart failure
- anxiety and habit

- some medicines (e.g. anti-inflammatory pain relievers and some blood pressure medicines).

## 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 rattles when you breathe, 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 look of the mucus can be a 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 related to 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 constant 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

The best treatment for a cough depends on the type and cause of the cough. Coughing caused by allergy or a common cold can often be relieved by non-prescription medicines. Some cough medicines can cause side effects and some can interact (interfere) with other medicines. Always ask a pharmacist or doctor for advice. Check with a pharmacist or doctor before giving medicines to a child. Cold, flu and cough products containing mucolytics, expectorants, cough suppressants, antihistamines and decongestants should not be given to a child younger than six years of age.

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 can help a wet cough to bring up more mucus and clear the chest.

**Expectorants** (e.g. guaifenesin, 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 urge to cough and relieve a dry cough. Cough suppressants are not suitable for a wet cough, or a cough caused by asthma or chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD).

**Antihistamines** (anti-allergy medicines) can relieve a dry cough caused by allergy. Sedating antihistamines can stop a cough caused by post nasal drip. 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. If possible, use a tissue or the bend of your elbow, not your hand. Turn your head away from food and others.
- After coughing up mucus, spit it into a tissue. Do not swallow it.
- Put used tissues in a bin straight away.
- Wash your hands well after covering a cough and also before eating, preparing food or caring for others. If you do not have soap and water, use an alcohol-based hand sanitiser.
- Stop a bout of coughing by sipping water or sucking lozenges. Do not give lozenges to young children.
- Breathe-in steam (e.g. from inhalations, vaporizers, showers, baths) to loosen mucus. Do not give inhalations to young children, as steam can burn.
- Try drinks of honey, or honey and lemon in warm water to relieve coughing.
- Don't smoke.

## Important

Seek medical advice about your cough if:

- you are coughing up blood
- you are coughing up 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 pain when breathing in
- it lasts more than two 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.

- Get plenty of rest and relaxation, especially if unwell.
- Eat regular, healthy meals, including plenty of fruit, vegetables and wholegrain foods. Limit foods high in fat, sugar or salt.
- Drink plenty of fluids to help thin mucus. Drink at least enough water every day to satisfy your thirst and 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.healthdirect.org.au](http://www.healthdirect.org.au)

### **Consumer Medicine Information (CMI)**

Your pharmacist can advise on  
CMI leaflets.

### **NPS Medicine Wise**

#### **Medicines Information Line**

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.***

## Related fact cards

- » *Asthma*
- » *Bladder and Urine Control*
- » *Colds and Flu*
- » *Hay fever*
- » *Heartburn and Indigestion*
- » *Pelvic Floor Exercises*
- » *Relaxation Techniques*
- » *Sinus Problems*
- » *Smoking*

Your Self Care Pharmacy: