



Pharmaceutical
Society of Australia



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. How a cough is treated depends on its cause.

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

Causes of coughing

Cough is an important 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, bronchiectasis, cancer)
- Hiatus hernia and gastroesophageal reflux – stomach acid leaks up into the oesophagus, stimulating coughing
- Heart failure
- Anxiety, nervousness and habit
- Some medicines (e.g., ACE inhibitors, beta blockers, aspirin and other non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs)).

Types of cough

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



- A **dry cough** is unproductive (no sputum), often with a tickly throat. Your chest does not feel or sound congested.
- A **wet cough** is productive (brings up sputum), your chest is tight or has rattles and you may feel congested (airways blocked with secretions) and breathless. It is a useful cough, helping to clear your airways of secretions. The colour, smell and appearance of sputum coughed up can be an important clue to the cause of the cough.

Sometimes coughing can be connected with a certain activity (e.g., exercise, eating, posture), environment 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).

Being able to describe your cough will help a doctor or pharmacist to choose the best treatment for you.

Problems caused by coughing

Coughing can be quite vigorous and 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 germs that cause respiratory tract infections can be in the droplets of moisture that are expelled during coughing.

Cough medicines

Coughing that lasts only a few days and is associated with allergy or a common cold can often be managed with non-prescription medicines. Ask a pharmacist for advice about the best treatment for you.

Non-prescription medicines that can help relieve coughing include:

- **Cough suppressants** (e.g., dextromethorphan, pholcodine) – control or suppress the cough reflex and can be used to relieve a dry cough. They are available as syrups and lozenges. A cough suppressant is not appropriate for a productive cough or a cough caused by asthma or COPD. Cough suppressants should not be given to children under two years of age
- **Expectorants/mucolytics** (e.g., guaiphenesin, bromhexine, senega, ammonia) – loosen and thin sputum and may help a productive cough to bring up more sputum and clear the airways
- **Antihistamines** – some antihistamines may help relieve cough associated with allergy or post nasal drip. Certain antihistamines should not be given to children under two years of age unless prescribed by a doctor.

Self care

- Take notice of the type and pattern of your cough. This will help to identify its cause.
- Always cover your mouth when coughing and turn your head away from food and others. This will help to stop germs spreading.
- After coughing up sputum, discard it in a tissue. Do not swallow it.
- Stop a bout of coughing by sipping water or sucking lozenges.
- Have steam inhalations (or hot showers) to loosen sputum.
- Wash your hands well before eating, preparing food or caring for others, to protect yourself and others from infection.

Your **Self Care** Pharmacist

Important

Consult a doctor about your cough if:

- You are coughing up blood or green, yellow, brown or rust coloured sputum
 - 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 regularly recurs.
- 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 otherwise).
- If urine leakage is a problem, try wearing 'panty liners' for protection. Regular pelvic floor exercises can improve bladder control.

Related fact cards

- *Asthma*
- *Colds and Flu*
- *Hay fever*
- *Heartburn and Indigestion*
- *Pelvic Floor Exercises*
- *Relaxation Techniques*
- *Sinus Problems*
- *Smoking series*

For more information

Consumer Medicine Information (CMI) leaflets – your pharmacist can advise on availability.

NPS Medicines Line – phone 1300 888 763 Monday to Friday, 9am to 6pm EST.

The Poisons Information Centre – in case of poisoning phone 131 126 from anywhere in Australia.

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

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The Family Cough Expert

Always read the label. Use only as directed.
If symptoms persist see your healthcare professional.