

Coughs

A cough may be *acute*; lasting less than 3 weeks, or *chronic*; when it may go on for more than 8 weeks. Coughs can also be dry or productive of sputum (*phlegm*).

Most adults experience episodes of coughing between 2 and 5 times a year, and about 1 in 5 people suffer from coughs during the winter months. Although coughing often impairs people's quality of life, it is rarely due to serious causes and usually gets better by itself.

An acute cough is most commonly caused by a viral upper respiratory tract infection (URTI) due to a cold.

A chronic cough is common in smokers and can sometimes suggest an underlying lung problem, but may also be caused by conditions outside the lung, such as heartburn (gastric reflux). Cough may also result from taking certain drugs (check the label), asthma, and environmental factors e.g. dusty workplaces.

Managing your condition

Coughing is usually harmless, and although coughs can be distressing (both for yourself and others living or working with you) and a nuisance because they often last for several weeks, acute coughs are almost always harmless and usually start to improve within three weeks.

There is **no need for antibiotics** as antibiotics do not work against viral infections, which cause most acute coughs. You may easily suffer a dry cough for 3 to 4 weeks after an infection has settled.

How can I avoid triggers?

- **Try not to cough** - Although this may sound easier said than done, you may be able to cough less often by trying not to cough, because our desire to cough can sometimes be influenced by our brain.
- **Stop smoking** - Smoking is one of the common reasons for a chronic cough. Stopping smoking not only improves your cough, but also benefits your health in other ways
- **Hydration** - Drink plenty of water to avoid dehydration, drinking liquids also helps to keep mucous membranes moist
- **Take steamy showers, and use a humidifier** - A hot shower can help a cough by loosening secretions in the nose. Humidifiers may also help.
- **Remove irritants from the air** - Perfumes and scented bathroom sprays may seem harmless, but for some people they can cause long-term sinus irritation. This can lead to a long-term cough because of the production of excess mucus. Take control by avoiding such scented products

How do I treat?

- **Home remedies** - Try simple home remedies, such as 'honey and lemon'; just add freshly squeezed juice from one lemon and a teaspoon of honey to a mug of hot water. Drink at least 6 to 9 glasses of water in a day and suck lozenges.
- **Cough mixtures** - There is little evidence to say whether over the counter medicines are effective for relieving cough symptoms. Despite the lack of research evidence, you may feel you get some benefit from over the counter preparations, speak to your pharmacist for advice
- **Paracetamol** - Paracetamol can help with relieving symptoms that may accompany a cough, such as a sore throat, fevers, and not feeling well.
- **Speak to your pharmacist** - for advice if you're not sure which type of medicine is best for you and your symptoms.

When should I seek advice?

Seek medical advice immediately if you feel more unwell than you'd expect, if it starts after you've choked on something, or if you notice any of the warning symptoms below, which in rare cases can suggest a more serious underlying cause:

- **Coughing up blood** - You cough up blood for no obvious reason.
- **Duration** - Your cough is not getting better within three to four weeks.
- **Chest or shoulder pain** - In addition to your cough, you have chest and/or shoulder pain.
- **Breathlessness** - You also find it difficult to breathe.
- **Weight loss** - You're losing weight for no apparent reason over a period of six weeks or more.
- **Voice changes** - Your voice becomes hoarse for longer than three weeks, and the hoarseness persists after the cough has settled.
- **New lumps or swellings** - You notice new swellings anywhere in the neck or above your collarbones.

More information is available at the following website

- NHS website - www.nhs.uk
- Or visit your local pharmacy for advice

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