

Coughing

Coughing is a reflex action of the throat to rid itself of any built up mucus or phlegm.

What to look for

Coughing is not a disease; however it may indicate [respiratory problems](#). By looking at what is coughed up (mucus, phlegm or blood – the colour and consistency), the frequency of coughing and whether there is any pain involved, it is possible for doctor's to pinpoint the underlying problem.

You cough when the membranes lining the respiratory tract produce excessive mucus or phlegm. These secretions help to protect your airways from infections and irritants. Coughing is the way of getting rid of this accumulation. Coughing prevents the breathing passages from closing and also prevents infected mucus from falling into your lungs and bronchial tubes which can be very dangerous.

Although coughs have many different patterns, they may be categorised according to two characteristics (duration and productivity).

Duration refers to how long the person needs to cough. A cough can come and go quickly, as when you cough up something stuck in your throat; it can last for several days if you have a cold; or it can be persistent and chronic, as when you have chronic bronchitis.

A productive cough is one that produces mucus or phlegm. White or clear phlegm is quite common. Yellow thick phlegm usually indicates the onset of infection.

A non-productive cough is a dry cough.

Causes

Anything that obstructs the windpipe or breathing passages can cause a cough. The most common cause is the [common cold](#), [flu](#), and [sinusitis](#). The mucus in the breathing passages causes the cough.

Coughs can also be triggered when you accidentally inhale small objects, such as pieces of food, or breathe in dust, cigarette smoke, and fumes.

Coughs can cause irritations to the airways themselves if not treated.

Drugs can cause coughing fits along with smoking. Smoking is a major cause of coughing and quite often smokers bring up thick phlegm. This is dangerous and usually indicated that they are in the first stages of [chronic bronchitis](#), [emphysema](#), [tuberculosis](#) or [lung cancer](#).

Any persistent cough may be a symptom of an underlying illness. Talk to your doctor about your type of cough, the frequency, the phlegm etc to allow him to diagnose the cause.

Although some of the chronic lung diseases in which coughing may be a symptom are incurable, most are treatable

Traditional Treatment

Having a cough is not necessarily dangerous especially if it is present with typical 'cold-like symptoms' such as a runny nose, sore throat and sneezing. This may be simply a case of the common cold.

Since coughing (particularly a phlegmy cough) is a protective response by the body, suppressing it with cough medicine not only reduces the clearing action but may serve to cover up a more serious underlying problem. See your doctor if the coughing goes on for longer than 7 – 10 days.

Antibiotics are not normally prescribed for a cold or a viral infection, the best remedy for this is bed rest and cold relieving remedies (see colds and flu). However antibiotics might be prescribed for an underlying bacterial infection. If your cold or flu produces thick, sticky sputum, an expectorant may help to clear your lungs.

A non-productive cough can be treated by over the counter cough suppressants, cough lollies and soothers. Many over-the-counter products contain ingredients that will slightly numb your irritated throat and may provide temporary relief.

Ultimately, for any cough that persists for more than 7 to 10 days, **seek medical advice**.

Alternative/Natural Treatments

The following alternative therapies may ease the discomfort of some respiratory infections. They do not treat the infection itself, but they may offer relief.

Chinese Herbs – Sang ju yin, a decoction of mulberry leaf (*Folium mori albae*) and chrysanthemum (*Flos chrysanthemi morifolii*), is a classic cough treatment. It contains a number of other ingredients as well and is available in prepared form. Sang ju yin, a decoction of mulberry leaf (*Folium mori albae*) and chrysanthemum (*Flos chrysanthemi morifolii*), is a classic cough treatment. It contains a number of other ingredients as well and is available in prepared form.

Herbal Therapies – A wide variety of herbs act as stimulating or relaxing expectorants that help the body remove excess mucus from the airways. Try a herbal cough mixture – available from our pharmacy. **Stimulating** expectorants increase the quantity and then liquefy mucus so it can be cleared out by coughing. **Relaxing** expectorants loosen the sputum and are soothing.

Homoeopathy – Homoeopaths recommend different remedies for the different stages of coughs. Homoeopaths recommend different remedies for the different stages of coughs.

- **Try [Bryonia](#)** if you are often thirsty and have painful bouts of dry coughs that intensify easily; if you are often thirsty and have painful bouts of dry coughs that intensify easily;
- **Take *Antimonium tartaricum*** if your cough is accompanied by hoarseness, difficulty in breathing, and considerable rattling in the chest; if your cough is accompanied by hoarseness, difficulty in breathing, and considerable rattling in the chest;

- **Try Drosera** if your throat tickles and you get violent coughing fits whenever you lie down; if your throat tickles and you get violent coughing fits whenever you lie down;
- **Take Rumex crispus** if a draft of cool air initiates a tickling cough; if a draft of cool air initiates a tickling cough;
- **Try [Aconite](#)** if you happen to get chilled and develop a fever and a barking cough; if you happen to get chilled and develop a fever and a barking cough;

Dietary Considerations

The more liquids you can drink the better as it tends to loosen up the mucus and make coughing it up much easier. Warm liquids (such as herbal teas), or filtered water, are best for this purpose. Try to avoid caffeine or alcoholic beverages.

Drinking fresh fruit and vegetable juices may help speed your recovery. You may be recommended [vitamin C](#) supplements, [zinc](#), garlic, horseradish, golden seal, [magnesium](#), [potassium](#), [chloride](#) and sustaining a well-balanced diet.

Personal Care

In addition to drinking plenty of liquids, including herbal teas, you may find relief by rubbing your throat and chest with essential oil of [eucalyptus](#) or [myrrh](#). A simple rub might help you breathe more easily, cough less, and get a good night's sleep.

Another way to reduce persistent night coughing is to sleep with the head of your bed raised a few inches. Try to avoid caffeine and [peppermint](#).

When to seek further professional advice

- Your cough lasts for more than 7 to 10 days
- Your cough produces yellow, green, pink, or rust-coloured sputum.
- Your cough is severe, enduring, and accompanied by any of the following signs: hoarseness, [sore throat](#), shortness of breath, [wheezing](#), chest pains or tightness, a temperature, [headache](#), back and leg aches, fatigue, rashes, or weight loss. See your doctor immediately if you have any of these additional symptoms.