

Coughs



Coughing is the way our body gets rid of something that is irritating the throat or airways (respiratory tract). It is part of the body's normal defence mechanism.

Symptoms

Coughs can be described as 'wet' or 'dry'. A wet cough means mucus (phlegm) is released from the chest after the coughing, and the chest may sound congested. The body will cough repeatedly trying to rid itself of the mucus that builds up in the airways. A dry cough does not produce mucus after coughing. Some virus infections cause dry coughs that may last up to 8 weeks after the infection is cleared.

If you cough too frequently or intensely, the chest muscles can feel sore and the voice become hoarse. You may have a headache, difficulty sleeping, or even cause damage to the blood vessels in your throat.

Causes

Coughing can be caused by:

- dust, smoke or pollution
- plant pollen or animal hair (see *Hay fever* Health Information Brochure)
- medical conditions like asthma or heart failure
- side effects of medicines such as some blood pressure medicines
- infections such as the common cold, flu, bronchitis, whooping cough or pneumonia
- a post-nasal drip (mucus constantly trickling down the back of the throat)
- a build-up of phlegm in the airways.

Lifestyle options

Here are some things you can do to help:

- Drink lots of fluids, such as water or soup broth. Fluids will help thin the phlegm.
- Use steam inhalations or a vaporiser for nasal congestion and post-nasal drip.
- Avoid cigarette smoke or quit if you smoke (see *Quit smoking* Health Information Brochure).
- Eat a healthy diet of fruits and vegetables.

Coughing causes saliva droplets to become airborne and spread respiratory diseases. Follow good hygiene and:

- cover the mouth and move away from people when coughing
- spit any phlegm into a tissue and immediately dispose of it in a rubbish bin
- wash your hands with soap or use a hand sanitiser after coughing, and before eating or handling food.

Pharmacy options

Always inform pharmacy staff if you are taking any other medicines, or if you have any other health conditions, because some over-the-counter medicines may not be suitable for you

The best treatment for a cough depends on what the cause is and the type of cough. There are medicines from the pharmacy that can help relieve coughing caused by viruses or allergies.

- For a *wet* (chesty) cough, ingredients such as bromhexine and guaiphenesin will help to thin the mucus and make it easier to remove from the chest.
- For a *dry* cough, the ingredients dextromethorphan and pholcodine can help stop the body's urge to cough. They should never be used if the cough is phlegmy or wet.
- **Antihistamines** are medicines that can help a dry cough caused by an allergy. Some antihistamines may help you sleep if the cough is disturbing through the night. These are not suitable for children.

Some cough mixtures can contain more than one type of active ingredient so always check with your pharmacist, as they might affect some medical conditions or interfere with your other medicines.

Other symptoms of a cold or flu, such as headache, fever or ache and pain can be helped by other pharmacy medicines (see *Colds and flu* Health Information Brochure).

Cough and cold medicines should not be used in children younger than 6 years old, instead use the lifestyle options or saline (salt water) nasal drops. For children aged 6–12 years old, talk to your pharmacist or doctor before giving them any cough or cold medicines.

Ask your pharmacist for advice on the most suitable treatment.

Seek medical attention immediately if:

- the cough is getting worse over time, or lasts longer than 3 weeks
- you recently started a new medicine and then developed a cough
- you cough up blood
- you have chest pain or feel dizzy or nauseous
- you get wheezy or have breathing difficulties
- you are losing weight for no reason
- the cough is mainly at night
- there is thick, brown or green coloured phlegm
- there are other symptoms such as neck pain or stiffness, or a rash on the body
- there is a fever that is lasting longer than 2 or 3 days.

Babies and very young children (under 5 of age) with a cough should be seen by a doctor as soon as possible.

More information

Health Direct: www.healthdirect.gov.au

NPSMedicinewise: www.nps.org.au

Disclaimer: The information provided is a guide only, is current at time of publishing, and is not intended to replace the advice of your pharmacist or doctor.

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