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Coughs

Definition

A cough is a reflex action that helps to clear your airways of mucus and irritating particles such as dust or smoke.

Description

Coughs may be acute (lasting less than 3 weeks), sub acute (getting better over a 3 to 8 week period) or chronic (lasting longer than 8 weeks). Coughs fall broadly into two categories: productive (chesty and mucus producing) and non-productive (dry).

Dry Coughs are usually caused by a viral illness. The cough is triggered by a tickling sensation in the throat. The upper airways may be inflamed and a post nasal drip may be present. A viral Cough usually resolves within 2-3 weeks.

Productive Coughs usually indicate a bacterial infection, or allergic reaction. When the airways are irritated, excess mucus is produced to trap foreign particles. Coughing then helps the body to remove this extra mucus from the airways. Non-infected mucus, produced during allergic reactions, appears white or clear. Mucus with a green or yellow colour is a sign of infection. Streaks of blood in the mucus may be a sign of mild trauma due to violent coughing. Heart failure may cause a cough with frothy pink mucus, while bright red mucus is a sign of fresh bleeding in the upper airways. If any blood appears in the mucus, your Doctor should be consulted. Productive Coughs are also referred to as '**chesty**' coughs, with the related symptoms of '**chestiness**' and '**congestion**'.

Cause

INFECTION

An acute cough is usually caused by a viral infection such as the common cold and is commonly associated with a sore throat. A dry cough can be early symptom of pneumonia along with fever, coloured mucus and breathlessness. Tuberculosis may present as a chesty cough and is more likely to occur in high-risk people such as the elderly, alcoholics, those with a suppressed immune system and immigrants from Africa, south-east Asia and Eastern Europe. Initial symptoms of whooping cough are similar to the common cold. The cough then develops a characteristic 'whooping' sound.

Suggested solutions

General

- » **Cough Medicine - ask your Pharmacist**
- » **Steam Vaporiser**

Natural

- » **Antioxidant Supplement**



Post-nasal Drip (PND) often develops in people as a result of allergies or the common cold. Nasal secretions entering and irritating the lining of the throat cause the PND cough.

Asthma may present as a chronic cough with wheezing, breathlessness or tightness of the chest.

Gastric reflux occurs when acidic stomach contents move upwards into the oesophagus. This can cause a burning sensation in the chest and a chronic cough may develop. A cough caused by reflux is usually worse at night or on bending and straining.

Bronchitis refers to inflammation of the bronchial tree (the breathing tubes within the lungs). Chronic bronchitis is characterised by a long-term, productive cough.

Bronchiectasis is an abnormal enlargement of the main airways (bronchi) that carry air into the lungs. This condition can cause a chronic, chesty cough with large amounts of coloured, foul-smelling mucus.

Medication such as ACE inhibitors cause a dry cough in 15% of people. The cough usually resolves within weeks of withdrawal of the drug.

Psychogenic cough, habit or nervous cough usually present as a barking or honking sound or as a repeated dry cough. This type of cough usually begins as part of a viral infection and continues voluntarily due to the attention the person receives or as a result of anxiety. Symptoms are absent during sleep with this type of cough.

Heart Failure may cause a type of cough. Left-ventricular heart failure may produce the symptom of a night-time cough, therefore it is important to seek medical advice for any type of unexplained or persistent coughing.

Treatment options

As with all conditions your Doctor should be consulted. Your Doctor will diagnose and treat this condition. A specific diagnosis by your Doctor can usually be made with a thorough history, physical examination and simple laboratory investigations. Your Doctor might suggest a chest X-ray and other tests to diagnose the cause of the cough.

Cough and cold medicines **should not** be given to children under 6 years of age. Cough and cold medicines should only be given to children aged 6 to 11 years on the advice of a Doctor, Pharmacist or Nurse Practitioner. There are potential risks associated with these products for children. There are no proven benefits in using cough and cold medicines in children.

Diet hints

- Try to avoid all foods that aggravate the cough reflex. Food allergies or intolerances may promote coughing.
- Dry foods e.g., biscuits or crispbread and spicy or very sweet foods may promote coughing, while liquids tend to have a soothing action.
- Foods high in vitamins A, C, E and zinc may help the body to combat any infections which may be present. Citrus fruits as well as red, orange and yellow fruits and vegetables are high in these vitamins.

- Garlic and onions should be eaten regularly to help shift mucus out of the lungs and help combat infections. Garlic has natural antibiotic properties which is thought to be useful in combating infections.
- Try to drink plenty of fruit and vegetable juices at room temperature. These may help expel mucus and sooth the throat. Ginger, added to juices and cooking, is an effective herb for coughing.

Vitamins/minerals/herbs

- Vitamin A may enhance immune function.
- Vitamin C may enhance immune function and may assist chronic bronchitis via its anti allergy actions
- Zinc may assist in boosting the immune system.
- Garlic may be useful due to its antibacterial properties.
- Liquorice herb can be effective to reduce coughing, enhance immune function and sooth the respiratory tract. Note: Caution should be used with people suffering from high blood pressure.
- Echinacea herb can assist as has antiviral and antibacterial actions.
- Cherry bark has an expectorant action which may reduce coughing.

Pharmacist's advice

Ask your Pharmacist for advice. Do not give any cough or cold remedies to children under the age of 12 except on the advice your Pharmacist or Doctor.

- 1) **Suppressants** are effective in relieving a dry cough. Common ingredients in cough suppressants include pholcodine, codeine and dextromethorphan. It is important that a cough suppressant is not used for a productive cough as this can worsen the condition.
- 2) **Demulcents** such as lemon, glycerin, honey and eucalyptus are soothing and have few side effects. They are particularly suitable for children due to their pleasant flavour.
- 3) **Expectorants** are used to treat productive coughs. They help loosen the mucus to make it more easily coughed up. The active ingredient is called guaifenesin.
- 4) **Sympathomimetics** are used when a combination of suppressants and expectorants is desired. They may cause sleeplessness and are not suitable for children, or patients taking certain medications. Active ingredients include pseudoephedrine and phenylpropanolamine.
- 5) Smoking is a common cause of coughing due to irritation it causes in the lungs (bronchitis) and increases the risk of bronchial infections. Ask your Pharmacist about the range of products available to help you stop smoking.
- 6) A **steam vaporiser** can help by humidifying the air and reducing irritation to the upper airways.

DISCLAIMER : This information is an educational aid only. It is not intended to replace medical advice for individual conditions or treatments. Talk to your doctor, pharmacist, nurse or naturopath before following any medical regimen to see whether it is safe and effective for you.