

Cough

What is coughing?

Coughing is a sudden forcing of air from the lungs. It is a natural reflex to clear the air passages. It can also be a symptom of a disease or other medical problem.

Some coughs are dry and hacking. Some coughs are deeper, even painful at times. Other coughs bring up mucus or phlegm. Healthcare providers call these coughs productive coughs. Coughs that bring mucus up out of your airways can make it easier to breathe. For example, if you have pneumonia, coughing is helpful because it clears the airway of mucus. This relieves chest congestion and makes it easier to breathe.

How does it occur?

Coughing often occurs when the airways are irritated. It can be caused by:

- A cold or flu
- Sinus infection
- Bronchitis
- Allergies
- Heartburn (reflux)
- Asthma.

It may also be caused by more serious illnesses such as:

- Heart failure
- Pneumonia
- Tuberculosis
- Cancer.

Some drugs may cause coughing as a side effect. Examples of such drugs are ACE inhibitors and beta blockers, which are drugs used to treat high blood pressure.

Sometimes people just have a nervous habit of coughing or throat clearing.

Any cough that lasts several weeks or more is called a chronic cough. This is true even if it occurs only in the morning, only at night, or only in the winter. One common cause of a chronic cough is exposure to irritants such as smoke or pollen. Some people with a chronic cough get so used to coughing that they consider it normal. This is often true of the smoker's cough that many smokers come to accept as a part of waking up in the morning. The problem may be more serious than they think.

How is it treated?

Many different medicines for coughs are available without a prescription. If you need relief from a dry, hacking cough, choose a type of cough medicine called a cough suppressant. If you need to loosen mucus, choose an expectorant.

- Cough suppressants are medicines that lessen the urge to cough. If you have a dry, hacking cough and don't have mucus in your airways that needs to be coughed up, a cough suppressant may help you cough less and sleep better. Cough medicines with the initials DM in the name contain the suppressant drug called dextromethorphan.
- Expectorants may help keep the mucus thin and bring up mucus from the lungs when you cough. This can relieve chest congestion and make it easier to breathe. The drug used most often as an expectorant is guaifenesin.

How can I take care of myself?

- **If you smoke, stop.** If someone else in your household smokes, ask them to smoke outside. Avoid exposure to secondhand smoke.
- Take cough medicine if recommended by your healthcare provider. Always follow the instructions on the label of cough medicines.
- If you have a wet-sounding cough, don't use medicines that contain antihistamines. Antihistamines make the mucus dry and harder to cough up.
- Unless your healthcare provider has told you differently, drink plenty of liquids to help loosen mucus and make it easier to cough it up. It can also help to drink warm liquids such as soup or hot apple juice.
- If the air in your bedroom is dry, a cool-mist humidifier can moisten the air and help make breathing easier. Be sure to follow the manufacturer's instructions for cleaning the humidifier often so that bacteria and mold cannot grow. You can also try running hot water in the shower or bathtub to steam up the bathroom. Sit in there for 10 to 15 minutes if you are coughing hard or having trouble breathing.
- Get plenty of rest.
- Call your healthcare provider or 911 right away if you have a cough that causes shortness of breath or severe pain, or if you begin coughing up blood.
- Call your healthcare provider right away if you have trouble breathing.
- Call your provider during office hours if you have:
 - A cough with fever higher than 101.5°F (38.6°C)
 - Phlegm that looks greenish or has streaks of blood in it
 - A cough that interferes with your sleep or daily activities
 - A cough that has not gotten better in 7 days
 - A violent cough that comes on suddenly
 - A high-pitched sound when you breathe in
 - Unexpected weight loss as well as a cough.

Developed by RelayHealth.

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