

Coughs

This fact sheet helps you to know what's 'normal' and what you can expect to happen if you develop a cough. It also tells you when you should become concerned and seek advice from a health professional.

Useful facts

- **Types** Coughing may be *acute*, lasting less than three weeks, or *chronic*, when it may go on for more than eight weeks. Cough can also be dry or productive of sputum (*phlegm*).
- **Frequency** Most adults experience episodes of coughing between two and five times a year, and about one in five people suffer from coughs during the winter months.
- **Rarely serious** Although coughing often impairs people's quality of life, it is rarely due to serious causes and usually gets better by itself.
- **What causes coughs?** Acute coughing is most commonly caused by a viral upper respiratory infection (URTI). Chronic coughing 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, environmental factors (dusty workplaces, for example), and reflux of stomach contents into your gullet.

What can I expect to happen?

- ✓ **Coughs are usually harmless** Although cough can be distressing (both for yourself and others living or working with you), acute coughs are almost always harmless and usually improve within three weeks.
- ✓ **No need for antibiotics** You don't normally need antibiotics, which may do more harm than good.
- ✓ **Duration** You may easily suffer a dry cough for 3 to 4 weeks after an infection has settled.
- ✓ **No need for investigations** You don't normally need any investigations if you suffer from acute cough.

What can I do myself to get better – now and in the future?

- ✓ **Try not to cough** Although this may sound easier said than done, you may be able to cough less often by trying hard not to cough, because our desire to cough can be affected by our brains.

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- ✓ **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.
- ✓ **Stop smoking** Smoking is one of the commonest reasons for chronic cough. Stopping smoking – or at least smoking less – not only greatly improves your coughing, but also benefits your health in many other ways (think heart attack, stroke, and lung cancer).
- ✓ **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 still get some subjective benefit from over the counter preparations – speak to your pharmacist.
- ✓ **Paracetamol** Paracetamol can help with relieving symptoms that may accompany a cough, such as a sore throat, fevers, and not feeling well.

When should I seek medical help?

Seek medical advice immediately if you feel more unwell than you'd expect, if you've inhaled a foreign body, 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 lasts for more than three to four weeks.
- **Chest or shoulder pain** *In addition*, 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.
- **Finger shape** The ends of your fingers take on a 'club-like' shape.
- **New lumps or swellings** You notice new swellings anywhere in the neck or above your collarbones.

Where can I find out more?

Check out the **NHS Choices** website (<http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/Cough/Pages/Introduction.aspx>) for more information on how you can treat and prevent cough. Remember that your pharmacist can also help you with assessing your symptoms.

