

Cough

Coughing is an automatic reaction to try to clear your airways. The cough reflex protects the airways of your lungs. However, it is important to seek medical attention if you have a cough that lasts for more than three weeks. If you're short of breath, cough up blood or have unexplained problems like weight loss or a high temperature (fever), you should see your GP urgently. Otherwise a pharmacist may be able to help with your symptoms. Cough affects us all if we need to clear our airways. [The most common cause is a viral infection](#) which causes a runny nose and cough. Viral infections can affect anyone. However, young children commonly have 5-6 viral infections a year, especially in the winter months. Chronic cough is common. 1-2 adults in 10 are affected.

Common causes of acute cough (lasting less than three weeks)

- [Upper respiratory tract infections](#). These are the most common cause of acute coughs. They are caused by infection with a germ (virus). They almost always get better within a week, without specific treatment. Symptoms may go on for up to three weeks.
- Lower respiratory tract infections. These are less common; they can lead to more serious lung infections such as [bronchitis](#) or [pneumonia](#). These conditions may be caused by infection with germs (viruses, bacteria or fungi).
- [Asthma](#). This causes wheeze, breathlessness and cough at night, in cold air and during exercise. An infection with a germ can make symptoms of asthma much worse. This is called an exacerbation of asthma.
- Irritants - smoke or chemical fumes that you breathe in may irritate the airways.

Common causes of subacute cough (lasting three to eight weeks)

- Airways that are slow to settle down after an infection. In this case the germ has gone, but your airways are still swollen and irritable, causing you to keep coughing. This is called airway hyper-responsiveness.
- [Whooping cough](#).
- Other infections which may cause a longer-lasting cough, such as [tuberculosis \(TB\)](#).

Common causes of chronic cough (lasting more than eight weeks)

- Postnasal drip. This is a condition where mucus in the nose drips down the back of the throat when you lie down. It can be caused by anything which causes your nose to produce more mucus. This includes [allergies](#), [hay fever](#) and [nasal polyps](#) as well as infections.
- [Acid reflux](#). Acid in the stomach washes up the food pipe and spills into the airways.
- Asthma. Undiagnosed or under-treated asthma causes cough.
- Side-effects of medication. For example, [angiotensin-converting enzyme \(ACE\) inhibitor medicines](#), which are used to treat [high blood pressure](#), can cause cough.
- [Lung disease caused by smoking - chronic obstructive pulmonary disease \(COPD\)](#). Lung damage causes cough and breathlessness to get steadily worse. This mainly affects smokers.

- Irritants such as cigarette smoke. This may be your own cigarette smoke, or from [being in contact with other people's smoke \(passive smoking\)](#).

When should I seek medical help?

- [Coughing up blood](#)
- [Weight loss](#)
- [Night sweats](#)
- [Breathlessness](#)

What treatments may be offered?

Treatment will depend on the likely cause of your cough.

For acute coughs due to viral infections, simple remedies may be all that is needed. This might include inhaling steam, or honey and lemon to soothe your throat. If you feel unwell with a temperature or aches and pains, [paracetamol](#) or [ibuprofen](#) may help. The cough will go away with time on its own.

You will be strongly encouraged to [stop smoking if you are a smoker](#). You will be offered [inhalers if you have asthma](#). If the cough is due to tablets given for high blood pressure, you can switch to another type. If bacterial infection is likely, you [may be prescribed antibiotics](#). A [steroid nasal spray](#) may help postnasal drip. [Losing weight](#), cutting out acid foods and alcohol and taking [medicine to stop acid in the stomach](#) may all help acid reflux.

You may be referred to a lung (respiratory) specialist for further tests. Most cases will be managed by your GP but you may be referred for further investigation and treatment at a hospital.

Patient Info <https://patient.info/health/cough-leaflet>

NHS Choices <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/cough/>