

Self-Care Guide - Cough in Adults

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 your pharmacist, your GP surgery or another suitably qualified health professional.

Useful facts

What causes a cough?

A sudden cough is most commonly caused by a harmless virus infection in connection with a cold. A longer-lasting cough is common in smokers and people with an underlying lung problem such as asthma or chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), or those with allergies such as hay fever. Other things such as heartburn (*gastric reflux*) or dusty workplaces can also make you cough.

Duration:

Most harmless coughs go away within three weeks, but can go on for up to eight weeks. Cough can be dry or may come with a thick mucus (phlegm).

Frequency:

Many adults get a cough between two and five times a year, and about one in five people get coughs in the winter months.

What can I expect to happen?

Coughs are usually harmless:

Although coughs can be a nuisance (both for yourself and others living or working with you) and may last for several weeks, most coughs are harmless and usually improve within three weeks.

No need for antibiotics:

When you have a cough from a virus infection, you won't need drugs called *antibiotics*. They won't work and may do more harm than good.

Duration:

You may continue to have a slight 'dry' cough for 3 to 4 weeks after a virus infection has settled.

Tests:

You won't normally need any tests if you have a cough for less than three weeks.

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

Remember that you can ask your pharmacist for advice.

Paracetamol and ibuprofen: Paracetamol and ibuprofen can help with relieving symptoms that may come with a cough and cold, such as a sore throat, fever, and not feeling well. Always read the label and instructions before using them.

Cough mixtures: For many over the counter medicines we don't know how well they work, but you may still find them useful. Speak with your pharmacist.

Home remedies:

Simple home remedies, such as 'honey and lemon' can help. – Add freshly squeezed juice from half a lemon and one to two teaspoons of honey to a mug of boiled water and drink while still warm.

Water:

Drink at least 6 to 9 glasses of water in a day, especially if you feel thirsty.

Rest:

Get plenty of rest.

Stop smoking:

Smoking is a common reason for an ongoing cough. If you can stop smoking – or at least smoke less – your cough is likely to get better in the long-term. You'll feel better and your health will also benefit in other ways – visit the NHS Website for details at <https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/quit-smoking/>.

When should I seek medical help?

Seek medical advice immediately if you feel more unwell than you'd expect, if your cough gets worse, or if you notice any of the warning symptoms below:

Severity:

Your cough is really bad or gets worse quickly – especially if it's a 'hacking' cough or you can't stop coughing.

Blood:

You cough up blood – contact your GP surgery urgently.

Foreign body:

You cough after you've choked on something.

Duration:

Your cough doesn't get better within three weeks.

Chest or shoulder pain:

You have chest and/or shoulder pain.

Breathlessness:

You also find it harder to breathe, or you breathe faster than normal.

Weight loss:

You lose weight for no apparent reason over a period of six weeks or more.

Voice changes:

You have a hoarse voice for longer than three weeks and this doesn't get better even after your cough has gone.

New lumps or swellings:

You notice new swellings anywhere in the neck or above your collarbones.

Alertness:

You're less alert than normal and feel unusually drowsy or sleepy.

Where can I find out more?

Check out the NHS Website (www.nhs.uk) for further information and speak with your pharmacist who can help you with assessing and managing your symptoms. Call 111 if you can't speak with your GP surgery and don't know what to do next.

Key references:

1. NICE Clinical Knowledge Summary 'Cough' (2015).
<https://cks.nice.org.uk/cough#!topicSummary>
2. NHS Website 'Cough': <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/cough/>