

Chronic cough

Information for patients

What is a chronic cough?

A chronic cough is a constant, irritating cough lasting for 8 weeks or more. This can be annoying and distressing.

There are two different types of cough:

- **A 'non-productive' or dry cough:**
 - Does not bring up any phlegm
 - Is triggered by a dryness or 'something in the throat' sensation that does not affect your ability to breathe
 - Can continue after a cold/flu illness has settled.
- **A 'productive' cough:**
 - Does bring up some phlegm, mis-swallowed food or liquid to allow you to breathe normally
 - Common during a chest infection.

What happens when you cough?

When you cough, the 'voice box' or vocal cords come together forcefully. In chronic cough, this can make the voice box irritated, resulting in more mucus being produced or the tiny blood vessels to rupture. These, in turn can cause more coughing as the throat becomes sensitive from even minor irritation. Gradually over time, the habit of coughing can become difficult to break.

Constant coughing can also cause soreness or tenderness in the throat, the upper chest, stomach or abdominal muscles. In some patients, bouts of coughing can bring on anxiety and this can make the cough worse.

It is important to learn that chronic cough is often a vicious cycle and to control it, requires persistent efforts to reduce the throat sensitivity and irritation.

What causes coughing and how to reduce their affect on you

In patients with chronic cough, there may be more than one cause. By identifying the trigger(s) to your cough, this can help reduce the episodes. The following list includes some common triggers and ways to reduce their affect.

- **Cold air, allergens, aerosol/cleaning substances, smoking**
 - When exposed to these, cover your mouth and nose, if necessary, with a scarf or mask
 - Avoid inhaling known allergens (e.g. pollen, dust or fur) or irritants
 - Anti-histamine medications can be taken if you have any allergies or you may wish to see your GP about medications
 - If you wish to consider stopping smoking, you should speak to your pharmacist or GP.
- **Physical exercise**
 - Start rhythmic breathing through the nose as you exercise.
- **Dryness**
 - Central heating, alcohol and caffeine can cause dryness in the throat
 - To help this, you could try steam inhalation. Breathe through your nose over a bowl of steaming water for a few minutes, 2-3 times a day
 - Sip cool water regularly during the day.
- **Hydration**
 - Drink at least 8 glasses of water or cordial per day
 - Avoid drinking too much tea, coffee, alcohol or fizzy drinks as they can cause throat dryness.

There are exercises you can do to help suppress your cough. These are described on Page 3. Do not feel discouraged that your cough is not improved immediately after you try these techniques. With time, you will be able to identify the urge to cough just before it starts and be able to suppress the cough.

We recommend using these techniques regularly for at least 6-8 weeks to observe any improvement. You should practice them during the day even when you are not coughing. This will remind you to use them when the coughing starts. You can ask your family or friends to remind you to do so if it would help.

Do you need further treatment?

Surgical treatment is rarely needed for chronic cough and it can often get better with suitable exercises. The latest guidelines have also reported that an examination of the 'voice box' or nose is not routinely required.

If you have any of the following symptoms or other concerns, please seek further medical advice:

- Unintentional weight loss
- Coughing up blood
- Lumps in your neck
- Difficulty or pain on swallowing.

How to control your cough

There is no 'quick fix' to stop a chronic or persistent cough.

You are the best person to understand your cough triggers and the best way to avoid them.

As chronic cough is often a vicious cycle, the aim is to break this by 'suppressing' or 'replacing' the coughing episodes. You can achieve this by using the following techniques. They can be practised as soon as you anticipate a cough is about to occur and for as long as the coughing continues.

- **Forced swallow**
 - Take a deep and deliberate swallow with or without a drink. You may have to do this several times.
- **Breathing exercises**
 - Sniff in through the nose quickly- up to 3 times in succession
 - Then blow air out through tightly pursed lips or make the sound "sssss"
 - Relax your shoulders as you do so and avoid pushing or straining from the throat
 - This helps warm and moisturise the air you breathe in and 'cushion' the voice box and throat to reduce irritation.
- **Sipping water or sucking ice cubes/sweets/honey**
 - This can have a soothing effect and increases swallow frequency.
- **Medication**
 - Some tablets used in high blood pressure and heart disease (e.g. ACE inhibitor) can cause dry cough and some asthma inhalers can cause husky voice. If you have any concerns, you should discuss this with your GP.
- **Asthma, Bronchitis, Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD)**
 - These conditions can make your throat, which is part of the airway, more sensitive
 - If you are prescribed treatment for these conditions, it is important that you take your inhalers/medications regularly as it can help to control your cough
 - If you find your inhaler reduces the desire to cough, seek advice from your GP on how regularly you should use your inhaler.
- **Acid or non-acid reflux.**
 - Simple lifestyle changes such as weight loss, avoiding greasy food, reducing caffeinated drinks (limit to 1-2 cups per day) and raising the head of your bed may improve reflux
 - If you have already been prescribed anti-acid medications for acid reflux or heartburn symptoms, you can continue taking them.