

## **Cough**

### **What is a cough?**

A cough is a common symptom of illness. Although coughs often sound bad, keep in mind that coughing is a good reflex that clears out the airways in the lungs and protects you from getting pneumonia.

You may have a dry and hacking type of cough. Or you may have a wet cough and cough up a lot of mucus. When you continuously cough for more than 5 minutes, it is called a coughing spasm.

### **What is the cause?**

Most coughs are caused by a viral infection. An infection of the trachea (windpipe) is called tracheitis. An infection of the bronchi (larger air passages in the lungs) is called bronchitis. Most people get such a viral infection a couple of times a year as part of a cold. These infections are usually not serious.

### **How long will it last?**

Usually bronchitis causes a dry tickly cough that lasts 2 to 3 weeks. Sometimes the cough becomes loose (wet) for a few days, and you cough up a lot of phlegm (mucus). This is usually a sign that the end of the illness is near.

### **How can I take care of myself?**

- **Medicines to loosen the cough and thin the secretions**

*Cough drops:* Most coughs can be controlled by sucking on cough drops or hard candy freely. Any brand will do. These help coat the irritated throat.

*Warm liquids for coughing spasms:* Warm liquids usually relax the airway and loosen up the mucus. Start with warm lemonade, warm apple juice, or warm herbal tea.

- **Cough-suppressant medicines**

Cough-suppressant drugs reduce the cough reflex. However, the cough reflex helps protect the lungs. Use cough-suppressant drugs only for dry coughs that interfere with sleep, school attendance, or work. They also help people who have chest pain from coughing spasms.

- **Humidifiers in the treatment of cough**

Dry air tends to make coughs worse. Dry coughs can be loosened up by drinking extra water and by using a humidifier in your bedroom.

- **Exercise**

You will find that gym and exercise trigger coughing spasms when you have bronchitis. If so, you should avoid such physical activity temporarily.

- **Active and passive smoking**

Don't be around anyone who smokes. Also avoid smoking since a cough may last weeks longer than it would without smoking.

- **Common mistakes in treating cough**

Antihistamines, decongestants, and antipyretics are found in many cough syrups. There is no proof that these ingredients will help your cough, and the antihistamines may make you sleepy. Expectorants are of unproven value but harmless. Stay with the simple remedies mentioned above or use dextromethorphan (DM).

Milk does not need to be eliminated from the diet. Restricting it improves the cough only if you are allergic to milk.

## **When should I call my health care provider?**

Call IMMEDIATELY if:

- Your breathing becomes fast or labored (when you are not coughing).

Call during office hours if:

- A fever (over 100°F, or 37.8°C) lasts more than 3 days.
- You have other concerns or questions.