

Chronic Cough Control Guide

What is chronic cough?

Chronic cough is a persistent cough lasting eight weeks or more. It can be accompanied by the following: runny nose, post-nasal drip (when mucous from the sinuses (nose) drips down your throat), throat irritation, hoarse voice.

What happens when you cough?

A cough is your body's way of responding when something irritates your throat or airways. An irritant stimulates nerves that send a message to your brain. The brain then tells muscles in your chest and abdomen to push air out of your lungs to force out the irritant.

Good (Helpful) Cough:

Everyone coughs from time to time. It is a necessary and important way of keeping your chest and throat clear to ensure air can easily flow in and out of the lungs, and to help prevent infections.

Bad (Unhelpful) Cough:

Coughing can be a learned behaviour, causing dizziness, headaches, chest and rib pain and a sore throat. When you cough, your vocal cords strike together forcefully. The vocal cords may become irritated, and this can cause more coughing. This can lead to the increased production of mucus which can trigger even more coughing, in a cycle which can be difficult to break. The more we cough the more the trachea (windpipe) becomes inflamed and swollen making us cough more. This can lead to anxiety and again further worsen the cough.

There are many reasons why we Cough:

Once serious and more easily diagnosed lung conditions have been excluded, the following are common conditions associated with chronic cough. In many cases, there may be more than one cause.

Respiratory conditions

Acute infections such as pneumonia, and chronic conditions such as asthma or bronchitis, some resulting in an increased amount of sputum.

Smoking

Causes irritation of the airways, however, nicotine withdrawal can increase cough for a period after quitting.

Anxiety

When stressed or anxious many people breathe rapidly and shallowly which can cause the throat to become dry and raw if for sustained periods.

Sinus problem / Post-nasal drip

When excess mucous from your sinuses drips down the back of your throat.

Gastro-oesophageal reflux disease (GORD) and laryngopharyngeal reflux (LPR)

When acid from your stomach passes upwards and irritates the back of the throat.

Infections

A cough can remain even after other symptoms of a cold, throat infection or chest infection have gone.

Medications

Angiotensin-converting enzyme (ACE) inhibitors, often prescribed for heart failure or blood pressure, can cause a chronic cough in some people.

In many cases, there are no obvious causes. Some people have a very sensitive cough reflex which does not easily respond to treatment of accompanying conditions.

How do you manage a productive cough?

If you have a cough that produces sputum, you may be referred to a physiotherapist who will show you ways to clear your chest.

- The active cycle of breathing (ACBT) is a series of exercises repeated in a cycle to aid sputum removal. The usual pattern is, Breathing Control – Deep Breaths - Huff. Ask your physiotherapist for the trust ACBT information sheet.
- If you have inhalers, use your reliever medication before chest clearance.

How do you treat chronic cough?

The treatment of chronic cough will depend partly on what is thought to be the cause. You may be told to take one of the following medicines:

- Antihistamines (allergy tablets)
- Decongestants (to relieve blocked sinuses)
- Antibiotics (to treat bacterial infections)
- Antacids (to weaken the acids in your stomach and help reduce reflux).
- Change of blood pressure or heart failure medication if appropriate.

How to reduce causes of coughing?

- Avoid known allergens if relevant (for example pollen or animal fur)
- If you are a smoker, try to quit (visit GP, or search NHS stop smoking services online)
- Reduce acid reflux by changing your diet and other lifestyle modifications.
- Keep a log of any identified triggers for your cough.

How to control your cough?

Try the following to decrease the sensitivity and irritation that has built up in your throat due to prolonged coughing:

- Sip water frequently throughout the day, sipping every 15 minutes to keep your throat moist. Aim to drink about 2 litres of water each day.
- Avoid caffeine and alcohol (which can dry the throat out).
- Try steam inhalation for 10-15 minutes (or as long as you can tolerate) every day. Place your head over a bowl of steaming water from the kettle, put a towel over your head and breathe in and out through your nose.
- Practice breathing in through your nose. Nose breathing reduces the irritating effect of dry cold air on the throat.
- Avoid medicated cough lozenges as they can dry your throat out. Try sucking on non-medicated lozenges, chewing gum or honey which increase swallow frequency and can have a soothing effect. You can also try sucking on ice cubes or frozen grapes.

The following strategies will help you suppress the cough by keeping the vocal cords apart. Practise them during the day (try to do 5 repetitions, 20 times a day) so you are ready to use them when you feel a cough coming on.

- Sniff in twice in quick succession, short and sharp (so you hear noisy air) then blow out gently through tightly pursed lips, with your shoulders relaxed. Don't push or strain from the throat.
- Tongue press – press the sides of your tongue to your top teeth holding for 3-5 seconds. In time, you will learn to control the cough just before it starts. Ask your family and friends to help remind you if it would help.

Important information

This patient information is for guidance purposes only and is not provided to replace professional clinical advice from a qualified practitioner.

Your comments

We are always interested to hear your views about our leaflets. If you have any comments, please contact the patient experience team on 0300 131 4784 or esh-tr.patientexperience@nhs.net.

Hand hygiene

We are committed to maintaining a clean, safe environment. Hand hygiene is very important in controlling infection. Alcohol gel is widely available at the patient bedside for staff use and at the entrance of each clinical area for visitors to clean their hands before and after entering.

Other formats

If you require any of the Trust leaflets in alternative formats, such as large print or alternative languages, please contact the Equality and Human Rights Department.

Tel: 0300 131 4434 Email: esh-tr.AccessibleInformation@nhs.net

After reading this information are there any questions you would like to ask? Please list below and ask your nurse or doctor.

Reference

The above documentation is based on the British Thoracic Society Clinical Statement on Chronic cough in Adults - Parker SM, Smith JA, Birring SS, et al. Thorax 2023;78(suppl 6):3–19

The Clinical speciality that have agreed this patient information leaflet: RESPS

Next review date: February 2026

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