Cough in adults

SELF-CARE FORUM FACT SHEET NO. 7

This fact sheet helps you know what is 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 a health professional.

Useful facts

What causes coughs?

A sudden cough is commonly caused by a virus infection in connection with a cold or flu.

A longer-lasting cough is more common in smokers and people with underlying lung problems such as asthma, and in those with allergies such as hay fever.

Coughs can also be caused by COVID-19 or bacterial chest infections. Other conditions such as heartburn (gastric reflux) as well as certain medicines or dusty workplaces can also make you cough. Rarely a cough is a sign of something serious like lung cancer.

Frequency

Many adults get a respiratory infection between 2-5 times a year.

What can I expect to happen?

Coughs are usually harmless

Although a cough can be distressing (both for yourself and others living or working with you), acute coughs that are not coronavirus-related tend to be harmless and usually improve within three weeks.

Duration

Coughs usually last up to three weeks but can last up to eight weeks. Coughs can be dry or may come with a thick mucus (phlegm).

Treatment for cough

Remember ask a member of your pharmacy team 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 and medicines: For many over the counter medicines, we don't know how well they work, but you may still find them useful. A herbal medicine, pelargonium is sometimes used for over 12s as are cough remedies containing guaifenesin. Speak to a member of your pharmacy team.

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.

No need for antibiotics

When you have a cough from a virus infection, you won't need antibiotics. They won't work and may do more harm than good. See the section on when to seek medical advice.

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What can I do to help myself now and in the future?

As well as pain relief, and cough remedies, there are other things you can do to help yourself feel better:

Water: Drink at least 6 - 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 or speak to a member of your pharmacy team about how to quit.

Vaping: Using vapes can also cause coughing. Although much less harmful than smoking, the healthiest option is not to smoke or vape. If you are vaping to quit smoking, you should aim to eventually stop vaping too.

When to seek help

A new continuous cough may be coronavirus.

Seek medical advice if you feel more unwell than you would expect or if you notice any of the signs below:

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

Duration: Your cough lasts longer than 3 weeks.

Foreign body: You cough after you have choked on something.

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.

Blood: Seek medical advice if you cough up small amounts of blood. If you cough up larger amounts, seek medical advice urgently.

Swollen glands: The side of your neck feels swollen and painful.

You have a weakened immune system: For example, through diabetes or chemotherapy.

Unexplained weight loss: You've lost weight for no reason.

Contact your surgery or ring NHS111 in England and Wales, the Phone First service in Northern Ireland or NHS24 in Scotland. They will tell you what to do and can arrange a call from a health care professional if you need one.

Where to find out more

A member of your pharmacy team can help with pain relief and advice.

Or, visit the NHS website in your country for more information:

NHS Website
NHS Inform, Scotland
NHS111, Wales
NI Direct, Northern Ireland

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