

Cough (acute)

A cough is a reflex action to clear your airways of mucus and irritants such as dust or smoke. Coughs may be dry or chesty. The cough is often worse at night. Coughing does not damage the lungs. Most coughs clear up within three weeks and treatment isn't usually needed.

What causes a cough?

Most people with a short-term cough have a respiratory tract infection caused by a virus. This includes upper respiratory tract infections, such as a cold, flu, laryngitis, sinusitis or whooping cough, lower respiratory tract infections, such as acute bronchitis and pneumonia (although this is rare). Coughs can occasionally be caused by non-infectious causes like asthma.

How should I treat my cough?

There's no quick way of getting rid of a cough caused by a viral infection. It will usually clear up after your immune system has fought off the virus. The simplest and cheapest way to soothe a short-term cough may be a warm drink containing honey and lemon.

What about cough medicines?

Clinical trials have not found that cough medicines are any better than a placebo or dummy treatment. As cough medicines don't make the cough get better any quicker, they are not provided as part of the Pharmacy First service.

Why do pharmacies sell cough medicines if they don't work?

Although there is no good evidence that cough medicines make the cough get better any quicker, some people feel that they help their symptoms. As cough medicines are considered to be safe for the vast majority of adults and for children over six years old, cough medicines can be bought from pharmacies for patients to soothe their cough.

Children and babies with coughs

Over-the-counter cough and cold medicines shouldn't be given to children under the age of six. There's a potential risk of these medicines causing unpleasant side effects in children, such as allergic reactions, sleep problems or hallucinations (seeing and hearing things that aren't real). Instead, give your child plenty to drink and if your child is over one, consider a warm drink of lemon and honey. Paracetamol and ibuprofen are not classed as cough and cold medicines and can still be given to children if they have a high temperature.

When should you (or your child) go back to your GP practice or contact NHS 111?

See your GP if you've had a cough for more than three weeks or if your cough is progressively getting worse. If you experience breathing difficulties, chest pain or you cough up blood, seek medical help immediately.

Quitting smoking

Within three to nine months after stopping smoking, you will no longer have a cough or wheeze and your breathing will have improved.

Antibiotics

Antibiotics are not used to treat coughs because they kill bacteria, not viruses. Unless you develop a secondary bacterial infection, such as pneumonia, antibiotics will not usually be advised.

Further information can be found at www.nhs.uk/conditions/cough