



# Cough

## What is a cough?

A cough is a reaction or reflex. Coughing helps keep things out of your lungs and clears things that are not suppose to be in your lungs.

## Why do I cough?

You usually cough because you are trying to get mucous (phlegm), infection, specs of dust (or other things inhaled from the air), out of your lungs. Other things like cold air can also cause some people to cough.

## What causes me to cough?

You cough when your cough receptors become irritated. You have cough receptors in your main breathing tubes (airways) and your smaller airways. You also have cough receptors in your throat, diaphragm (the large muscle between the abdomen and lungs) and your stomach. These receptors protect your lungs.

## Why does some coughing last a really long time and other times for only a short time?

How long you have a cough depends on what is causing the cough. You may have a cough that lasts just a couple of days or a cough that troubles you for many weeks. A cough that lasts for just a week or so is usually from a cold, flu, sinus or minor lung infection. If your cough lasts more than a couple of weeks, it can be from post nasal drip, heartburn, asthma, medications or something more serious such as a lung tumor. You should see your health care provider for a cough that lasts a long time.

## Can I give my cough to someone else or “catch” a cough from someone?

A cough from a lung infection (like a cold or the flu) can be spread to someone else so you can catch it. You cannot get (or spread) asthma, allergies, heartburn, chronic bronchitis, or a lung tumor. If you are not sure if you can spread your cough, it is always best to think that you can spread it, and cover your mouth when coughing. If someone is contagious with the flu or a cold, the best way to keep from

getting it is to make sure to wash your hands often. If someone is coughing around you, ask them to cover their mouth when they cough.

You should also stay away from things that can irritate your lungs and cause you to cough. Things that can irritate your lungs are:

- air pollution
- things that give you allergies
- smoking
- being exposed to smoke from others
- cold air

## How is a cough treated?

How your cough is treated depends on what is causing your cough. For example, if your cough is caused by asthma, then taking your asthma medicines should help your cough. If your cough is caused by a bacterial infection, then antibiotics from your health care provider may be needed.

## When should I talk to my health care provider about my cough?

Contact your health care provider if your cough:

- lasts for more than a few weeks
- has blood in it
- comes on at about the same time that you start to sweat when you sleep (night sweats), lose weight, or have a fever
- comes on about the time it is hard for you to breathe
- is worse at night
- is from allergies
- comes on when you have heartburn

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