

# When is a cough a concern?

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Hearing a chorus of coughs is typical at this time of year. An occasional cough is normal and healthy. A cough that persists for several weeks or brings up discolored or bloody mucus may indicate a condition that needs medical attention.

A [cough](#) is your body's response 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.

While an occasional cough is expected, a cough that persists may be a sign of a medical problem. At times, coughing can be very forceful.

Prolonged, vigorous coughing can irritate the lungs and cause even more coughing. It also can cause sleeplessness, dizziness or fainting, headaches, [urinary incontinence](#), vomiting and even broken ribs.

## Acute vs. chronic cough

A cough is considered "acute" if it lasts less than three weeks. Some of the causes of an acute cough include:

- Common cold
- Influenza
- Inhaling an irritant, such as smoke, dust, chemicals or a foreign body
- Pneumonia, which is an infection in one or both lungs
- Whooping cough

Some common causes for a "chronic" cough include:

- Allergies
- Asthma
- Bronchitis
- Chronic [obstructive pulmonary disease](#) (COPD)
- COVID-19
- Croup
- Gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD)

- Heart failure
- Lung cancer
- Respiratory syncytial virus (RSV)

## Treating a cough

Knowing when to see your health care team can be challenging. Usually, a benign cough will be short-lived and often associated with a [runny nose](#) or cold-like symptoms. Most of the time, those kinds of coughs will go away on their own.

Cough medicines are the most common antidote when the cough is acute, causes much discomfort, interferes with sleep, and is not associated with any potentially worrisome symptoms. Be sure to follow the dosing instructions on the medication.

To ease your cough, cough drops, or hard candies may help relieve a dry cough and soothe an irritated throat. Don't give them to a child under age 6, however, because of the risk of choking. Also, consider taking a teaspoon of honey to loosen the cough.

Other ideas include:

- Eating chicken noodle soup.
- Getting plenty of rest.
- Using a cool mist humidifier or taking a steamy shower to moisturize the air.
- Drinking warm liquids, such as broth, tea, or [lemon juice](#), to soothe your throat.
- Avoiding tobacco smoke.

Antibiotics may not be part of the treatment plan. Antibiotics treat bacterial infections, such as pneumonia, but they won't help viral

illnesses, like colds, flu, and most sore throats.

Talk with your health care team if you start coughing up thick, green to brown sputum with fevers and chills. If you have [chest pain](#) or feel like you can't breathe, call 911.

## **Is a cough always a sign of illness?**

Coughs are most notably known as a sign of a problem in your body. However, a cough can be a more straightforward issue.

A cough usually indicates an irritation in the lungs or the airway. The irritation triggers the nerves that connect to our brain, telling our body to expel it. A cough is your body's reflex of trying to get something out that's not supposed to be there.

If you have a new cough accompanying other symptoms like a runny nose and congestion, or if you're having fevers, you can consider wearing a mask and doing a COVID-19 test to ensure you're keeping those around you safe. If you have any other concerns, see your health care team to discuss them.

Pay attention to your cough. Although most coughs are usually minor, they can make you feel poorly. Trying the latest remedy is tempting, but the best thing you can do is take care of yourself. Rest, drink fluids, and keep the air around you moist. Also, remember to wash your hands frequently.

Provided by Mayo Clinic

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