

Cough in Adults

This fact sheet helps you to know what's '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.

Could it be Coronavirus?

It is still important to be mindful about coronavirus (COVID-19) symptoms, which are the same for adults and children and can include the symptoms below. Many of these are similar to symptoms of illnesses such as colds and flu.

- A high temperature
- A new and continuous cough
- A loss or change to your sense of smell or taste
- Shortness of breath
- Feeling tired, or exhausted
- A headache
- A sore throat
- Loss of appetite
- Diarrhoea
- Feeling sick or being sick
- An aching body
- A blocked or runny nose

You should consult the advice specific to your area in the UK:

If you are in a high risk group, it is important that you read the appropriate sections and make contact with the recommended agencies if you have symptoms or queries.

For general advice on what to do if you have symptoms, or for further testing and vaccination information, please visit:

- NHS England: <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/coronavirus-covid-19/>
- Northern Ireland NIDirect: <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/campaigns/coronavirus-covid-19>
- NHS Inform for Scotland: <https://www.nhsinform.scot/illnesses-and-conditions/infections-and-poisoning/coronavirus-covid-19>
- NHS Wales 111: [https://111.wales.nhs.uk/encyclopaedia/c/article/coronavirus\(covid19\)/](https://111.wales.nhs.uk/encyclopaedia/c/article/coronavirus(covid19)/)

Useful facts about coughs

What causes coughs?

A sudden cough is most commonly caused by a virus infection in connection with a cold or flu, but could be coronavirus (see above). A longer-lasting cough is more common in smokers and people with underlying lung problems such as asthma or chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD). A longer-lasting cough may also be more

common in those with allergies such as hay fever. Other conditions such as heartburn (gastric reflux) as well as certain medicines or dusty workplaces can also make you cough.

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.

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. But see the section below on when to seek medical advice.

Duration

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

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

Remember that you can 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 with 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.

Water: Drink at least six to nine 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.

When should I seek medical help?

A new continuous cough may be coronavirus - see section above before reading further

Seek medical advice if you feel more unwell than you'd expect or if you notice any of the warning symptoms 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 three weeks;

Foreign body: You cough after you've 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.

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 can I find out more?

Below are NHS website links in your area of the UK or speak to a member of your pharmacy team, who can help you with assessing and managing your symptoms.

- <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/cough/>
- <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/conditions/cough>
- <https://www.nhsinform.scot/illnesses-and-conditions/lungs-and-airways/cough/>
- <https://111.wales.nhs.uk/cough/>