

# Cough

## What is a cough?

A cough is a common symptom of illness. Although coughs often sound bad, keep in mind that coughing is a good reflex that clears out the airways in the lungs and protects your child from getting pneumonia.

Your child may have a dry and hacking type of cough. Or your child may have a wet cough and cough up a lot of mucus. When your child continuously coughs for more than 5 minutes, it is called a coughing spasm.

## What is the cause?

Most coughs are caused by a viral infection. An infection of the bronchi (larger air passages in the lungs) is called bronchitis. Most children get such a viral infection a couple of times a year as part of a cold. These infections are usually not serious. Many chronic coughs are caused by asthma or allergies (Give Claritin or Zyrtec).

## How long will it last?

Usually bronchitis causes a dry tickly cough that lasts 2 to 3 weeks. Sometimes the cough becomes loose (wet) for a few days, and your child coughs up a lot of phlegm (mucus). This is usually a sign that the end of the illness is near. Yellow or green sputum is not always a bad sign just means normal sloughing of cells - if this persists for more than 7 days you will need to see your provider.

## How can I take care of my child?

- **Medicines to loosen the cough and thin the secretions** Cough drops: Most coughs in children over age 4 years can be controlled by sucking on cough drops or hard candy. The cough drops or candy coat the irritated throat. Warm liquids for coughing spasms: Warm liquids usually relax the airway and loosen up the mucus. Start with warm lemonade, warm apple juice, or warm herbal tea. (Avoid this if your child is less than 4 months old.) Do not add liquor because it may aggravate the cough if your child inhales the fumes of alcohol into his lungs. Also, your child could become intoxicated from an unintentional overdose. May give OTC Claritin or Zyrtec is >2yr for wet coughs along with Nasal Saline spray 2-3 x per day to dry the cough UP.
- **Cough-suppressant medicines** Medicines that contain dextromethorphan (DM) are cough-suppressants. In general, you should not give these medicines to children. Coughing helps protect the lungs by clearing out germs. If the coughing lasts for more than a couple of days, check with your child's health care provider. If given use only at bedtime to help your child get some rest from coughing.
- **Increase the head of the bed** to help postnasal drainage drain - prop head on pillows if >2yr or have child sleep in carseat or swing if an infant.
- **Humidifiers** Dry air tends to make coughs worse. Dry coughs can be loosened up by encouraging your child to drink plenty of liquids and by using a humidifier in your child's bedroom.
- **Exercise** Gym and exercise may trigger coughing spasms when children have bronchitis. If so, they should avoid such physical activity temporarily.
- **Active and passive smoking** Don't let anyone smoke around your child.
- **Common mistakes in treating cough** Antihistamines, decongestants, and antipyretics are found in many cough syrups. There is no proof that these ingredients will help your child's cough, and the antihistamines may make your child sleepy. Expectorants are of unproven value but harmless. Stay with the simple remedies mentioned above or talk with your provider. Milk does not need to be eliminated from the diet. Restricting it improves the cough only if your child is allergic to milk. Never stop breast-feeding because of a cough.
- **If your child has a home nebulizer** you may start Albuterol or Xopenex treatments every 4-6hr for up to 48hrs - your child must be seen.

## When should I call my child's health care provider?

Call IMMEDIATELY if:

- Breathing becomes difficult AND is not better after you clear the nose.
- Breathing becomes fast or labored (when your child is not coughing).
- Your child starts acting very sick.

Call during office hours if:

- A fever (over 100°F, or 37.8°C) lasts more than 3 days.
- The cough lasts more than 3 weeks.
- You have other concerns or questions.

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