



Cough

Patient and Family Education

This teaching sheet contains general information only. Your child's doctor or a member of your child's health care team will talk with you about specific care for your child.

What is a cough?

Coughing is a reaction that helps clear your child's chest and lungs. It is a common symptom and can occur all of a sudden or be long-term, depending on the cause.

- A cough can be due to an infection or an allergy.
- A cough can also be due to something more serious such as asthma or something stuck in the airway.
- Children with sudden coughing attacks (nonstop for more than five minutes) should be seen by a doctor to find out if treatment is needed.

Are all coughs alike?

There are several different types of coughs. A good description of your child's cough can help the doctor find the cause. Coughs can be:

- Wet sounding or dry.
- Harsh or deep
- Barking or "seal-like"
- High-pitched or "tight"

When your child coughs is also important. Take note of whether the cough occurs with eating or exercise, during the day or night, or is due to something your child is exposed to (like a pet or pollen). Your child may cough once or twice and then stop, or cough several times in a row.

What is the treatment?

The treatment of a cough is usually directed at its cause. Once the cause is known, cough treatments could include any of these:

- Find out and avoid any irritating causes (such as cigarette smoke)
- Coughing helps clear mucus from the chest and lungs.
 - Most children will not spit out the mucus but will swallow it into their stomachs. This is not a problem.
- Give cough and cold medicines only as advised by your child's doctor. This includes both prescription and over-the-counter medicines.
 - For children younger than 6 years of age – cough and cold medicines do not work in this age group. They also can cause serious side effects.
 - Do not give a child younger than 6 years old any medicine that is made for children over the age of 6.
 - Many brands of cough and cold medicines have the same kinds or have unnecessary ingredients. Using more than 1 brand or mixing brands can cause a serious overdose and harm in your child.
 - Do not use a combination cold medicine that contains acetaminophen or ibuprofen.
- Place a cool mist humidifier by your child's room or play area.
 - Hot steam vaporizers are not safe. They may burn your child.
 - Change the water and clean the humidifier each day.
 - Follow the cleaning instructions that came with the machine, so it doesn't grow germs and mold.

In case of an urgent concern or emergency, call 911 or go to the nearest emergency department right away.

Cough, continued

- Avoid cigarette smoke and odor around your child.
- Follow up as ordered by your child's doctor

When should I call the doctor?

Call 911 or your local ambulance service **right away** if your child:

- Is so tired and weak that he hardly responds to you
- Is working **very** hard to breathe or finds it hard to take a breath
- Grunts when he breathes
- Chest retractions (skin pulling in around the ribs when breathing)
- Has a blue or dark purple color to the nail beds, lips or gums.
- Stops breathing for more than 10 seconds
- Cannot speak while trying to breathe
- Has any breathing problem that needs care **right away**.

Call your child's doctor if your child has:

- A cough and does not smile or show interest in play for at least a few minutes during any four-hour period
- A cough that began after choking on an object in the past few days.
- A new fever since being seen by the doctor (temperature over 100.3°F)
- New symptoms such as chest pain, wheezing or stomach pain
- Problems taking the medicine ordered by his doctor
- A cough that often wakes him up at night

What will happen if the cough is not treated?

Any child with a prolonged cough (more than 10 days) should be seen by his regular doctor. The doctor can focus on what is causing the cough and treat it as needed. A prolonged cough could be a sign of a more serious infection and breathing problems.

In case of an urgent concern or emergency, call 911 or go to the nearest emergency department right away.