
What is a cough?

Coughing is a reaction that helps clear your child's chest and lungs. It is a common symptom that can happen all of a sudden or can last over time (long-term). This depends 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.
- Your child should see their doctor if they have sudden coughing attacks (nonstop coughing for more than 5 minutes) 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 happens with eating or exercise, during the day or night, or when your child is exposed to something like a pet or pollen. Your child may cough 1 or 2 times and then stop, or they may cough several times in a row.

What is the treatment?

Most often, the treatment is directed at its cause. Once the cause is known, cough treatments may 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.
- For children younger than 6 years old – **DO NOT**:
 - Give cough and cold medicines. They will not work and can also cause serious side effects.
 - Give a child younger than 6 years old any medicine that is made for children over the age of 6.
 - Use a combination cold medicine that has acetaminophen or ibuprofen.
- For children 6 years of age and older:
 - Give cold and cough medicines only as advised by your child's doctor. This includes both prescription and over-the-counter medicines.

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

Cough, continued

- Many brands of cough and cold medicines have the same kinds of ingredients. Do not use more than 1 brand or mix brands. This can cause a serious overdose and harm your child.
- **DO NOT** use a combination cold medicine that has acetaminophen or ibuprofen.
- You can give children older than 12 months of age 1 teaspoon of honey at bedtime to calm their cough. You may repeat the dose 1 time during the night.
- 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. This is so it does not grow germs and mold.
- Avoid cigarette smoke and smells around your child.
- Schedule a follow-up visit with your child's doctor if advised.

How can I help prevent the spread of germs?

- Hand hygiene is the most important thing you can do to help prevent the spread of germs. You may use:
 - Soap and water to wash your hands well for at least 20 seconds. Rinse and dry them well.
 - An alcohol-based gel or foam if your hands do not have any dirt or grime on them.
- Teach your child to:
 - Cover their mouth and nose with a tissue when they cough or sneeze.
 - Put the used tissue in the trash and wash their hands right away.
 - Cough or sneeze into their upper sleeve or elbow, not their hands, if they cannot use a tissue.

When can my child return to daycare or school?

Keep your child home until they:

- Feel better.
- Do not have a fever (temperature of 100.4°F or higher) without using medicines for 24 hours.

When should I call the doctor?

Call the doctor if your child has:

- A cough and does not smile or show interest in play for at least a few minutes during any 4-hour period.
- A cough that began after choking on an object in the past few days.
- A new fever since seeing the doctor (temperature of 100.4°F or higher).
- New symptoms, such as chest pain, wheezing or stomach pain.
- Problems taking medicine ordered by the doctor.
- A cough that often wakes them up at night.

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Cough, continued

What about a prolonged cough?

Any child with a prolonged cough (more than 10 days) should see their doctor.

- The doctor can check what is causing the cough and treat the cause as needed.
- A prolonged cough could be a sign of a more serious infection or other breathing problem.

When should I call 911?

Call 911 **right away** if your child:

- Is so tired and weak that they hardly respond to you.
- Is working **very** hard to breathe or finds it hard to take a breath.
- Grunts when they breathe.
- Has chest retractions (skin pulling in around the ribs when breathing).
- Has nails, lips or gums that turn blue or purple.
- Stops breathing for more than 10 seconds.
- Cannot talk while trying to breathe.
- Has any breathing problem that needs care **right away**.

This teaching sheet contains general information only. Talk with your child's doctor or a member of your child's healthcare team about specific care of your child.

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