

Cough

Online version with active resource links at: <http://cancer-help.me/cough>

Coughing is your body's natural reflex to help clear your airways of irritants and germs to prevent infection. A cough is a sudden, noisy and violent expulsion of air from the chest, caused by irritation in the air passages, or a reflex.

Chronic and/or dry cough can be due to cancer, infection, side effects of chemotherapy, and other cancer treatments.

Coughs can also be caused by allergies, irritants such as smoke, gastric reflux or heartburn. These coughs may be relieved or minimized. Talk with your doctor to discuss the possible underlying cause or reason you are experiencing a cough and how to address it.

Relieving side effects is an important part of cancer care and treatment. This is called symptom management or palliative care. Talk with your health care team about any symptoms you experience and any change in symptoms.

Coughing can be managed differently based on the underlying cause. Treating the cause may result in the elimination of the symptom.

General practices that may reduce the cough:

- Avoid irritants (smoke, strong smells, overly dry air)
- Keep your head elevated when sitting and sleeping.
- Use saline via a nebulizer to reduce dryness and irritation of airways.
- Chest physiotherapy, an airway clearance technique to drain the lungs, and may include percussion (clapping), vibration, deep breathing and huffing or coughing, may help cough or spit out mucus.

Things you can do for cough management:

- Talk to your doctor about your cough and how it is impacting your day to day activities.
- Describe your cough and how it is impacting your activities the best that you are able to your doctor. Think about what kinds of things/activities worsen or relieve your cough. How long you have had your cough? Do you cough out mucous or blood? Is it a dry cough? Chronic? Have you been losing weight suddenly without explanation? Do you get short of breath? Do you have a fever?
- There are some medications your medical team may try. Be sure to take as prescribed and provide feedback if you find them unhelpful. If you are prescribed an antibiotic for an infection, take it as prescribed. Do not stop taking the antibiotic just because you feel better.
- If you suffer from heartburn, try to avoid foods that aggravate your symptoms (see symptom management - heartburn for further ideas)
- Quit smoking and/or avoid environmental/occupational exposure to irritants.
- You may try using a humidifier to keep your throat and nasal passages moist if you have a chronic, persistent dry cough.
- If it is okay with your doctor, you may try using cough drops or an over the counter preparation (see drug categories below).
- If you have a cold or a viral infection, try getting rest and plenty of fluids.
- If you suffer from allergies it is a good idea to vacuum and dust furniture weekly since dust can aggravate your symptoms. You may try reducing the humidity in your home to less than 50%. Also, use air conditioning instead of leaving the windows open so that outside irritants do not get inside your home.

Content adapted from websites below.

Resources for Additional Information:

- [NIH, Cough](#)
- [Chemocare, Cough and Chemotherapy](#)
- [Cancer.net, Cough](#)
- [Cancer.net, When to call doctor during treatment](#)

Recursos en Español:

- [Chemocare, Tos y quimioterapia](#)
- [Cancer.Net, Tos](#)