



# Coughs in Adults and Children

Coughing is the body's way of removing foreign material or mucus from the lungs.

There are two kinds of coughs:

1. **Nonproductive coughs** are dry coughs that do not produce mucus. A dry, hacking cough may develop toward the end of a cold or after exposure to an irritant, such as dust or smoke.
2. **Productive coughs** produce phlegm or mucus that comes up as you cough. This kind of cough generally should not be suppressed. It is needed to clear mucus from the lungs.

Coughs can be caused by many things, like dry air, smoking, or even by being around secondhand smoke. A cough may also be a symptom of another health problem, like a cold or the flu, croup, allergy, asthma, sinusitis, bronchitis, or pneumonia.

## Prevention

- Do not smoke. A dry, hacking “smoker’s cough” means that your lungs are constantly irritated. It is also important to stay away from other people’s cigarette smoke (secondhand smoke). Make sure that you keep your children away from secondhand smoke too.
- Drink lots of fluids (like water).
- To prevent coughs, avoid dust and other pollutants or wear a face mask if these pollutants bother you.

## Home treatment

- Coughs that follow illnesses caused by viruses may last up to several weeks and can often get worse at night. Prop up your head with extra pillows at night. You can also elevate a coughing child’s head, unless he or she is under 1 year of age.
- If you have a dry, hacking (nonproductive) cough, a cough suppressant can help you or your child sleep at night. Use cough syrups very cautiously with young children. Always follow the directions on the label.
- Drink plenty of water. Water helps loosen phlegm and can soothe an irritated throat. Dry, hacking coughs can be treated by putting a little honey in hot water, herbal tea, or lemon juice. Do not give honey to children under 1 year of age. It can make them sick.
- Cough drops, lozenges, and hard candy can also soothe irritated throats, but most will not stop a cough. Do not give cough drops, lozenges, or hard candy to children under 6 years of age. Expensive medicine-flavored cough drops are not any better than inexpensive candy-flavored ones or even regular, hard candy.

- For dry coughs, try making the air in the bedroom more moist by using a humidifier to produce steam.
- Inhaling steam from a cold-steam vaporizer or hot shower may help to loosen chest congestion. *Do not put a young child in the shower.* Instead, have the child sit down in the bathroom to inhale the steam.
- Stop smoking and avoid secondhand smoke.

### Call Kaiser Permanente if ...

- The mucus that is coughed up is bloody.
- The cough is deep with lots of mucus.
- The cough involves wheezing, shortness of breath, difficulty breathing or tightness in the chest.
- You have a fever that persists or returns after being without it for 2 or 3 days.
- Your child has shaking chills with a cough.
- Your child has nighttime cough spasms.
- A *productive* cough lasts longer than 10 to 14 days without improvement.

Dry, hacking coughs can last several weeks after an illness caused by a virus. Yellow or green mucus do not necessarily mean that a bacterial infection requiring antibiotics is present.



### Other resources

- Visit your doctor's home page at [kp.org/mydoctor](http://kp.org/mydoctor) to find more information about cold, flu. And cough. You can also access health and drug encyclopedias, interactive programs, health classes, and much more.
- Contact your Kaiser Permanente Health Education Center or Department for health information, programs, and other resources.

This information is not intended to diagnose health problems or to take the place of medical advice or care you receive from your physician or other health care professional. If you have persistent health problems, or if you have additional questions, please consult with your doctor.