

Cough, Pediatric

Coughing is a reflex that clears your child's throat and airways (*respiratory system*). Coughing helps to heal and protect your child's lungs. It is normal to cough occasionally, but a cough that happens with other symptoms or lasts a long time may be a sign of a condition that needs treatment. An acute cough may last only 2–3 weeks, while a chronic cough may last 8 or more weeks.

What are the causes?

Coughing is commonly caused by:

- Infection of the respiratory system by viruses or bacteria.
- Breathing in substances that irritate the lungs.
- Allergies.
- Asthma.
- Mucus that runs down the back of the throat (*postnasal drip*).
- Acid backing up from the stomach into the esophagus (*gastroesophageal reflux*).
- Certain medicines.

Follow these instructions at home:

Medicines

- Give over-the-counter and prescription medicines only as told by your child's health care provider.
- **Do not** give your child medicines that stop coughing (*cough suppressants*) unless your child's health care provider says that it is okay. In most cases, cough medicines should not be given to children who are younger than 6 years of age.
- **Do not** give honey or honey-based cough products to children who are younger than 1 year of age because of the risk of botulism. For children who are older than 1 year of age, honey can help to lessen coughing.
- **Do not** give your child aspirin because of the association with Reye's syndrome.



Lifestyle

- Keep your child away from cigarette smoke (*secondhand smoke*).
- Have your child drink enough fluid to keep his or her urine pale yellow.
- Avoid giving your child any beverages that have caffeine.

General instructions

- If coughing is worse at night, older children can try sleeping in a semi-upright position. For babies who are younger than 1 year old:
 - **Do not** put pillows, wedges, bumpers, or other loose items in their crib.
 - Follow instructions from your child's health care provider about safe sleeping guidelines for babies and children.
- Pay close attention to changes in your child's cough. Tell your child's health care provider about them.
- Encourage your child to always cover his or her mouth when coughing.



- Have your child stay away from things that make him or her cough, such as campfire or tobacco smoke.
- If the air is dry, use a cool mist vaporizer or humidifier in your child's bedroom or your home to help loosen secretions. Giving your child a warm bath before bedtime may also help.
- Have your child rest as needed.
- Keep all follow-up visits as told by your child's health care provider. This is important.

Contact a health care provider if your child:

- Develops a barking cough, wheezing, or a hoarse noise when breathing in and out (*stridor*).
- Has new symptoms.
- Has a cough that gets worse.
- Wakes up at night due to coughing.
- Still has a cough after 2 weeks.
- Vomits from the cough.
- Has a fever that had gone away but returned after 24 hours.
- Has a fever that continues to worsen after 3 days.
- Starts to sweat at night.
- Has unexplained weight loss.

Get help right away if your child:

- Is short of breath.
- Develops blue or discolored lips.
- Coughs up blood.
- May have choked on an object.
- Complains of chest pain or pain in the abdomen when he or she breathes or coughs.
- Seems confused or very tired (*lethargic*).
- Is younger than 3 months and has a temperature of 100.4°F (38°C) or higher.

These symptoms may represent a serious problem that is an emergency. Do not wait to see if the symptoms will go away. Get medical help right away. Call your local emergency services (911 in the U.S.). Do not drive your child to the hospital.

Summary

- Coughing is a reflex that clears your child's throat and airways. It is normal to cough occasionally, but a cough that happens with other symptoms or lasts a long time may be a sign of a condition that needs treatment.
- Give medicines only as directed by your child's health care provider.
- **Do not** give your child aspirin because of the association with Reye's syndrome. **Do not** give honey or honey-based cough products to children who are younger than 1 year of age because of the risk of botulism.
- Contact a health care provider if your child has new symptoms or a cough that does not get better or gets worse.

This information is not intended to replace advice given to you by your health care provider. Make sure you discuss any questions you have with your health care provider.