

PATIENT INFORMATION

CHRONIC COUGH

WHAT IS A CHRONIC COUGH?

A cough that lasts for more than six weeks may be considered a chronic cough. Sometimes, chronic cough may only be in the morning, only at night, or when you lie down. It can be seasonal (winter, spring) or just after rains. It may not even be quite a cough, but rather a tickle in the throat with a need to frequently clear your throat.

Everyone coughs once in a while. Cough is the second most common reason for obtaining medical advice. Coughing is a natural body mechanism for eliminating irritating and harmful substances from the lungs and respiratory tract. A chronic cough is a symptom, not a disease. It is a sign that something is wrong with the breathing system. A common cold or simple respiratory infection, for instance, can be followed by a cough that lasts as long as a couple weeks. If your cough hangs on longer than usual, you could be developing a chronic cough. If you buy a lot of cough medicine and carry cough drops with you most of the time, you may have a chronic cough. That's why you shouldn't take cough medicines for longer than a couple weeks unless your doctor tells you to. Medicine may help (or mask) the cough, but the underlying cause could be getting worse.

If you have shortness of breath with a cough, cough up blood, or have pain with coughing, you should see your doctor immediately.

WHAT ARE SOME CAUSES OF CHRONIC COUGH?

Asthma. Cough may be the only symptom of asthma or allergy. It may be accompanied by the typical shortness of breath and wheezing. Asthma is inflammation of the air passages, which causes swelling of the lining of the airway, mucus production, and "twitchiness" of the muscle surrounding them. This inflammation can be caused, or made worse by, many factors; including activities, allergies, environment, season, time of day, and stress.

Cigarette-related. A "cigarette cough" indicates that your smoking has already damaged your breathing passages. You may be so used to your cigarette cough that you don't even notice it and can't tell if a change has occurred. Continued smoking results in inflammation and increased production of mucus (chronic bronchitis). Eventually, destruction of the lung (emphysema) occurs. Both chronic bronchitis and emphysema can cause chronic cough.

Infections. Just like a cold can cause a couple of weeks of coughing, chronic infections can cause a chronic cough. Of greatest concern is Tuberculosis (TB), either a new infection or recurrence of an old infection, can cause chronic cough. This can be accompanied by fever, sweats, blood in the sputum and weight loss.

Acid Reflux. Acid coming up from the stomach can cause cough by irritating the throat, vocal cord or airways. Acid reflux also causes heartburn, but some people may not feel any heartburn and only have the cough. Neutralizing the acid or preventing the reflux relieves the irritation and the cough slowly improves.

Allergies or Post nasal drip. Inflammation of the nasal passages (rhinitis) or sinuses (sinusitis) produces secretions in the nose. Some of this mucus may drip down into the back of the throat and vocal cords and causing chronic cough. This type of cough can often be a 'tickle' or more of a need to clear your throat. Rhinitis and sinusitis are often caused by allergies and may be seasonal or year round.

Medicines. Certain medicines, particularly certain blood pressure medications called **ACE inhibitors** (e.g. lisinopril, enalapril, benazapril, etc.) can cause cough.

Other. There are myriad other causes of chronic cough including medication side effects, pulmonary fibrosis, swallowing problems, congestive heart failure, cystic fibrosis, occupational dust inhalation, and cancers of the throat, neck and vocal cords. These are rare, but must be excluded.

Make sure you consult your physician to evaluate you for these conditions.