

Chronic Cough

What is a cough?

Coughing is how your body clears foreign objects and mucus from your lungs and breathing tubes. A cough that lasts a long time can be a sign of a health problem. A chronic cough is a cough that lasts longer than eight weeks.

What can cause a chronic cough?

Common causes of a chronic cough include heartburn, asthma, smoking, certain medicines used to treat high blood pressure, and postnasal drip, which can be caused by allergies or sinus problems.

Diseases, such as tuberculosis and lung cancer, can cause a chronic cough, but these are rare.

What can my doctor do about my chronic cough?

Talk to your doctor if you have a cough that lasts longer than eight weeks. Your doctor will ask whether you smoke or have smoked in the past, and whether you have any allergies, are exposed to chemicals where you work, or have heartburn. Tell your doctor about any medicines that you are taking, including over-the-counter and herbal medicines.

If you smoke, your doctor can help you quit. If you are taking a medicine called an

angiotensin-converting enzyme inhibitor (or ACE inhibitor) for high blood pressure, your doctor may switch you to a different medicine.

If the cause of your cough is not obvious, you may need to have some tests done. A chest x-ray is usually the first step. If your chest x-ray is normal, your doctor will look for common conditions that can cause a chronic cough, like postnasal drip, asthma, and heartburn. He or she may want you to take prescription medicine or make lifestyle changes to treat these problems and stop your cough.

If your x-ray is not normal, you may need to have more tests done, such as a lung scan or breathing tests. Depending on the test results, your doctor might order other tests or have you see a doctor who specializes in lung and breathing problems.

What if my child has a chronic cough?

Chronic cough in children is usually caused by asthma, respiratory infections, or heartburn. Young children can even have a cough because something is stuck in their windpipe.

Talk to your doctor if your child has a cough that lasts longer than four weeks.

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This handout is provided to you by your family doctor and the American Academy of Family Physicians. Other health-related information is available from the AAFP online at <http://familydoctor.org>.

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