

Cough - General

Definition

- A cough is the sound made when the cough reflex clears the lungs. It helps protect the lungs from infections.
- A coughing fit or spell is over 5 minutes of nonstop coughing
- Coughs can be dry (no mucus) or wet (with mucus)

Health Information

Causes

- **Viral bronchitis.** Most coughs are part of a cold that includes the lower airway. The bronchi are the lower part of the airway that go to the lungs. Bronchitis in children is always caused by a virus.
- Many viruses can cause a cough. This includes cold viruses, influenza, croup and bronchiolitis (RSV) viruses.
- Bacteria do not cause bronchitis in healthy children.
- Chronic bronchitis in adults is caused by smoking.
- **More serious causes:** whooping cough, pneumonia and airway foreign body.
- **Asthma.** Asthma is the most common cause of chronic coughs in children. In adults it's smoking.
- **Allergic Cough.** Some children get a cough from breathing in an allergic substance. Examples are pollens or cats. Allergic coughs can be controlled with allergy medicines, such as Benadryl.

Phlegm or Sputum

- Mucus or phlegm can be white, grey, yellow or green.
- Yellow or green phlegm is a normal part of the healing of viral bronchitis.
- This means the lining of the windpipe was damaged by the virus. It's part of the phlegm your child coughs up.
- Antibiotics are not helpful for the yellow or green phlegm seen with colds.

Trouble Breathing: How to Tell

- Trouble breathing is a reason to see a doctor right away. Respiratory distress is the medical name for trouble breathing.
- Here are symptoms to worry about:
- Struggling for each breath or shortness of breath
- Tight breathing so that your child can barely speak or cry
- Ribs are pulling in with each breath (called retractions)
- Breathing has become noisy (such as wheezes)

Prevention of Spread to Others

- Cover the nose and mouth with a tissue when coughing or sneezing.
- Wash hands often. After coughing or sneezing are important times.

Care Advice

1. Overview:

- Coughs are a normal part of a cold. Viral bronchitis is the most common cause of a new cough in children.
- Coughing up mucus is very important. It helps protect the lungs from pneumonia.
- A cough can be a good thing. We don't want to fully turn off your child's ability to cough.
- Here is some care advice that should help.

2. **Homemade Cough Medicine:**
 - Goal: Decrease the irritation or tickle in the throat that causes a dry cough.
 - AGE 3 months to 1 year: Give warm clear fluids to treat the cough. Examples are apple juice and lemonade. Amount: Use a dose of 1-3 teaspoons (5-15 ml). Give 4 times per day when coughing. Caution: Do not use honey until 1 year old.
 - AGE 1 year and older: Use HONEY ½ to 1 teaspoon (2-5 ml) as needed. It works as a homemade cough medicine. It can thin the secretions and loosen the cough. If you don't have any honey, you can use corn syrup.
 - AGE 6 years and older: Use COUGH DROPS to decrease the tickle in the throat. If you don't have any, you can use hard candy.
3. **Non-Prescription Cough Medicine (DM):**
 - Non-prescription cough medicines are not advised. Reason: No proven benefit for children and not approved under 4 years old. (FDA 2008.)
 - Honey has been shown to work better for coughs. (Caution: Do not use honey until 1 year old).
 - If age over 4 years old, you might decide to use a cough medicine. Choose one with dextromethorphan (DM). It's present in most non-prescription cough syrups.
 - When to Use: Give only for severe coughs that interfere with sleep or school. Give every 6 to 8 hours as needed.
4. **Coughing Fits or Spells:**
 - Breathe warm mist (such as with shower running in a closed bathroom).
 - Give warm clear fluids to drink. Examples are apple juice and lemonade.
 - Reason: Both relax the airway and loosen up any phlegm.
5. **Vomiting:**
 - For vomiting that occurs with hard coughing, give smaller amounts per feeding.
 - Reason: Vomiting from coughing is more common with a full stomach.
6. **Fluids:**
 - Try to get your child to drink lots of fluids.
 - Goal: Keep your child well hydrated.
 - It loosens up any phlegm in the lungs. Then it's easier to cough up.
7. **Humidifier:**
 - If the air in your home is dry, use a humidifier. Reason: Dry air makes coughs worse.
8. **Fever:**
 - For fevers above 102° F (39° C), give acetaminophen (such as Tylenol) or ibuprofen. Note: Lower fevers are important for fighting infections.
 - For ALL fevers: Keep your child well hydrated. Give lots of cold fluids.
9. **Antibiotics Not Needed:**
 - Antibiotics are not helpful for viral infections.
 - They can only kill bacteria.
- 10 **Avoid Tobacco Smoke:**
 - Tobacco smoke makes coughs much worse.
- 11 **What to Expect:**
 - Viral bronchitis causes a cough for 2 to 3 weeks.
 - Sometimes, your child will cough up lots of phlegm (mucus). The mucus can normally be gray, yellow or green.
- 12 **Return to School:**
 - Your child can go back to school after the fever is gone.
 - Your child should also feel well enough to join in normal activities.

Call Your Doctor If

- Trouble breathing occurs
- Wheezing occurs
- Cough lasts more than 3 weeks
- You think your child needs to be seen
- Your child becomes worse

Pediatric After Care Instructions

Author: Barton Schmitt MD, FAAP

Copyright 2000-2018 Schmitt Pediatric Guidelines LLC

Disclaimer: This health information is for educational purposes only. You the reader assume full responsibility for how you choose to use it.