

# Chronic Cough in Adults

# What is a cough?

---

Coughing is a necessary part of our body's normal cleaning routine for the lungs. We cough to clear unwanted mucus or phlegm from our airways, and to remove any foreign particles such as dust. The most common cause of a cough is a viral upper respiratory tract infection or the common cold.

Usually, a cough caused by a cold goes away within two to four weeks. However, when a cough lasts longer than eight weeks, this is considered a **chronic cough** and you should make an appointment with your GP to investigate.

## More than 'just a cough'

---

It can be difficult to know if a cough is trying to tell you something.

Coughing is a problem when:

- It is unexplained and persistent
- It lasts for more than eight weeks
- It is accompanied by other symptoms such as breathlessness, wheezing or heartburn
- It results in complications such as pain, fatigue and difficulty sleeping
- You are coughing up blood or have had more than one diagnosis of pneumonia.

The presence of serious symptoms such as those listed above may prompt medical attention sooner than eight weeks.

A cough can occur for many different reasons. It is important to see your GP to find out why you are coughing as it may be a symptom of hayfever, asthma or another lung disease, or a condition not related to the lungs.



**Early detection is best. Don't miss the warning signs.  
Check your lung health by completing our Lung  
Health Checklist.**

# Investigating your chronic cough

When you have an appointment with your GP, they will do some initial tests such as a physical examination, including listening to your chest. Your GP will also ask you questions to understand more about your chronic cough.



**It may be helpful to keep a diary to track your cough, including any changes you have noted. A diary can help provide an accurate record to discuss with your GP.**

Your GP will ask you questions such as:

- How long you have had your cough for
- Whether you experience any other symptoms with your cough, such as:
  - A runny nose
  - Fever
  - Wheezing
  - Shortness of breath
  - Heartburn
- Your smoking and/or vaping history, including any exposure to second-hand smoke
- Your current and past work history and whether you were/are exposed to any hazardous agents, such as dust, fumes or gases
- Whether you take any prescription medications. Some medications, such as blood pressure medications, may cause chronic cough
- How your cough is impacting your daily life. For example, if it is affecting your sleep.

Additionally, as part of investigating your chronic cough with your GP, you should also undergo:



Chest X-ray



Spirometry

## OTHER TESTS THAT MAY BE REQUIRED

It is unlikely that you will be diagnosed with a condition causing your chronic cough during your first appointment. Depending on their assessment and your history, you may need to undergo additional tests, either with your GP or after they have referred you to a specialist, such as a respiratory specialist.

Additional tests may include:



Computed Tomography (CT) scans



Other lung function (breathing) tests



Blood tests or skin tests to assess for allergies.

**Chronic cough can be a symptom of a condition that is not related to the lungs. This means that you may be referred to specialists such as a gastroenterologist or an allergist for further testing.**



After investigating the cause of your chronic cough and ruling out all other possibilities, you may be diagnosed with an unexplained chronic cough. This is not uncommon.

You may require referral to a cough specialist or clinic to further develop a plan to manage your unexplained chronic cough.

Even without a specific cause diagnosis, there are options you can explore that may help reduce the burden of your cough. These may include:

- Speech therapy
- Medication options to reduce cough sensitivity.

# Ways you can manage your cough

---

Sometimes, even if a condition causing your chronic cough has not been diagnosed, or you have been diagnosed and treated for a condition causing your chronic cough, the cough may remain.

You can help manage your chronic cough by:



Avoiding potential triggers, such as extreme temperatures, second-hand smoke and hazardous environments.



Keeping your throat moist by sipping water frequently. Avoid caffeine and alcohol, which can dry out your throat. It may also help to breathe through your nose to reduce contact with dry air.



Avoiding speaking for long periods of time or take breaks as needed to reduce irritation in your throat.



If you smoke, commit to quit. Smoking and/or vaping affects your health and worsens your respiratory symptoms. Quitting is the most important thing you can do to improve your overall health and lung function. For support to quit, talk to your GP or connect with a Quitline counsellor (13 7848) or an online service like QuitCoach.



**Ensure your vaccinations are up to date, including influenza and COVID-19 vaccinations. Speak with your GP about what is appropriate for you.**

## LUNG FOUNDATION AUSTRALIA SERVICES

---



Information and Support Team



Lung disease information resources



Education webinars



Support groups



E-newsletter

## EXTERNAL LINKS

---

Asthma Australia

[asthma.org.au](http://asthma.org.au)

Australasian Society of Clinical  
Immunology and Allergy (ASCI A)

[allergy.org.au](http://allergy.org.au)

Centre of Excellence in  
Severe Asthma

[severeasthma.org.au](http://severeasthma.org.au)

Freecall 1800 654 301  
[enquiries@lungfoundation.com.au](mailto:enquiries@lungfoundation.com.au)  
[lungfoundation.com.au](http://lungfoundation.com.au)  
PO Box 1949 Milton, QLD 4064



**Lung  
Foundation  
Australia**