Lung Foundation Australia

Understanding **chronic cough in adults**

What is a chronic cough?

Coughing is a natural reflex to help clear unwanted mucus (phlegm) and things like dust from your airways, especially after a cold or virus. However, if you have had a cough that hasn't improved for more than 8 weeks, it may be a sign of other health problems, so it is important you speak with your GP.

Chronic cough = Coughing most days + Coughing for more than 8 weeks

Even if you have a lung condition, you should speak with your GP if your cough is worrying you or if it is worse than usual.

Why should you speak with your GP if you have a chronic cough?

Coughing can affect your everyday life

- Makes you feel tired
- Affects your sleep
- Increases your daily stress
- Makes you feel embarrassed and uncomfortable in public
- May affect the people you live or work with

Coughing may cause other problems

- Makes existing health conditions worse
- Urinary and bowel leakage
- Pain in your chest and stomach muscles

Coughing may be a sign of another health problem

- Lung diseases (even if you have an existing lung condition, a changed or persistent cough could signal further issues)
- Nervous system/brain disease
- Stomach issues like reflux
- Heart diseases
- Infections
- Voice box/throat conditions
- Middle ear and sinus conditions (due to excess mucus)

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Step-by-step guide to assessing your chronic cough

1 Speak with your GP

Make sure you discuss with your GP

Information about you

- Work exposure to dusts or irritants
- Existing health conditions
- Your medications
- Family history of chronic cough
- Smoke/vape history
- Previous treatments for your cough

About your cough

- How long and how often you cough
- If your coughing has changed over time
- When your cough is worse, e.g. in the morning or evening
- Rate your cough severity from 0 to 10 (0 = no cough, 10 = worst imaginable cough)
- If you cough up anything (mucus)
- What makes your cough worse e.g. cold air, strong smells, dust
- What makes your cough better
- Is this cough different from any previous cough (particularly if you have an existing lung condition)
- How coughing affects your life

Other symptoms you may have

- Coughing up blood
- Shortness of breath
- If your voice has changed
- Fever or weight loss
- Difficulty swallowing
- Chest infections that keep coming back
- Runny nose
- Problems with your balance
- Tingling or pain in your fingers or toes
- Bad taste in your mouth
- Burning sensation in your chest after eating

If you are worried about the appointment with your GP, try writing down responses to all the questions above to help you. You could also bring someone for support and to help ask questions.

2 Undergo tests ordered by your GP



A chest X-ray

An X-ray can show some causes of chronic cough such as pneumonia or lung diseases.



Lung-function tests

Also called spirometry, these tests measure how much air your lungs can hold and how fast you can breathe out.



Chronic cough guidelines recommend a chest X-ray and a lung-function test as the best way to find out what's causing a cough.

If your GP hasn't arranged these tests, you can ask:

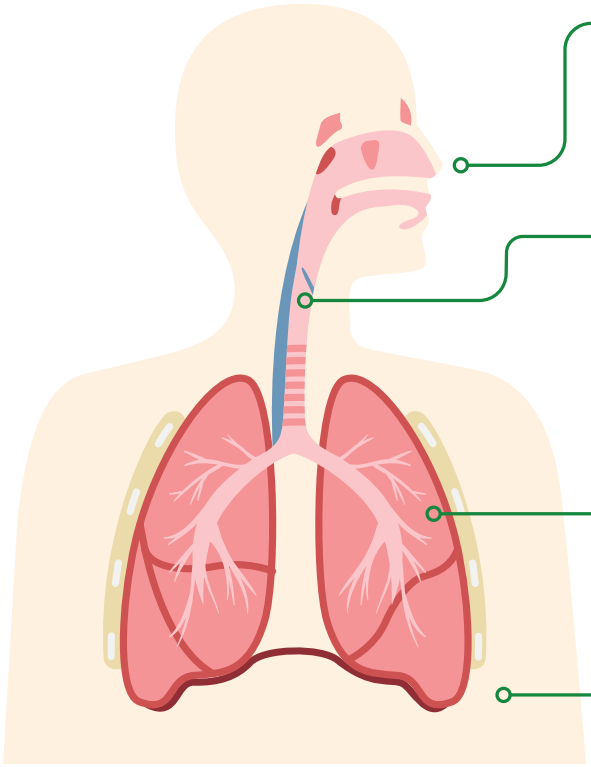
"I read that a chest X-ray and lung-function test are recommended for people with a chronic cough. Should I have had these tests? If not, could you explain why?"

These tests should be covered by Medicare. Speak with your GP about any additional costs involved and how to arrange them.

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3 Discover the cause of your chronic cough

Coughs can have many causes. Some common causes are shown below.



- Problems with your airways (nose, sinuses)

- Problems with your throat
- Gastro-oesophageal reflux disease (GORD)
- Problems swallowing
- Infections

- Problems with your lungs including asthma, bronchitis, lung diseases, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), bronchiectasis and lung cancer
- Problems with your airways
- Problems with your heart
- Infections

- Breathing in dust, gases and fumes in the workplace
- ACE inhibitors – medications commonly used to treat high blood pressure

4 Discuss how to manage your cough and who else can help you

Depending on the cause of your cough, your GP will either recommend an approach to treatment or refer you to a specialist for further advice.

Potential treatment approaches

- Lifestyle changes
- Self-management techniques
- Medications that are specific to your condition as recommended by your GP

Scan the QR code to find out more about **potential treatment approaches**

Scan the QR code to find out more about **things you can do to help manage your cough**

Possible specialists

Your cough may not be related to your lungs, so you may be referred to a range of specialists:

- Respiratory physician – lungs and breathing
- Ear, nose and throat specialist
- Gastroenterologist – stomach and digestion
- Speech pathologist – works with language and swallowing
- Neurologist – brain and nerve problems

Sometimes, a cause for your cough may not be found. This is called unexplained chronic cough. If this is the case, your GP will refer you to a respiratory specialist for further tests and to help manage your cough.

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5 Follow-up with your GP and other healthcare professionals

If your GP or other healthcare professional recommends treatment, ask when you should expect to see results and when to book follow-up appointments.

- It can take time for some treatments to work so it's helpful to know when you can expect to see your cough improve
- Follow-ups are important to track progress and decide if further investigation is needed
- If at any time you are concerned about your symptoms, treatment or test results, contact your GP

GP prescribes a treatment

Follow your treatment as discussed with your GP

Visit the GP for a follow-up

Cough has stopped
Discuss with your GP if you need to continue with the treatment

Cough still there
Speak to your GP about treatment options, further tests, or if seeing a specialist is needed

Treatment stopped

Cough does not return
Speak with your GP if you need to return for further follow-up

Cough returns
Your GP may refer you to a specialist

Questions to ask your GP

It's your body and your health, so it's important to ask questions and get answers. Use this checklist when talking with your GP.

- [ ] What might be causing my cough?
- [ ] Should I get a chest X-ray and a lung-function test? If not, why?
- [ ] Do I need any other tests? If so, how and when do I get them?
- [ ] What treatments are available, and how long might it take for my cough to improve?
- [ ] Do I need to see a specialist? If so, who?
- [ ] Are there any out of pocket costs for the tests/ treatments?
- [ ] When should I return for a follow-up appointment?
- [ ] What should I do if my cough doesn't improve?

5 Steps to assessing and managing your chronic cough

Coughing most days lasting more than 8 weeks

1. Speak with your GP
2. Complete tests ordered by your GP
3. Confirm the cause of your cough
4. Discuss management options and who else can help you
5. Book a follow-up review with your GP

Further information and support



Contact our Lung Health Helpline on 1800 654 301. This free and confidential service is available Monday to Friday 8:00am – 4:30pm (AEST) (excl. public holidays) or fill in the form on our website.

Note to reader: This information is intended as a general guide only and is not intended or implied to be a substitute for professional medical advice or treatment. While all care is taken to ensure accuracy at the time of publication, Lung Foundation Australia and its members exclude all liability for any injury, loss or damage incurred by use of or reliance on the information provided. Always consult with your doctor about matters that affect your health.

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