

# 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.



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)

# 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



#### Information about your cough

- How long you have been coughing
- If your coughing has changed over time
- How often you cough
- When your cough is worse, e.g. in the morning or evening
- Score the intensity of your coughing from 1 to 10 (0 being no cough at all and 10 being the worst cough you have ever had or can imagine)
- If you cough up anything (mucus)
- What makes your cough worse or better
- What triggers your cough, e.g. cold air, strong smells or dust
- Is this cough different from any previous cough (particularly if you have an existing lung condition)
- How coughing affects your life



#### Information on any 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.**

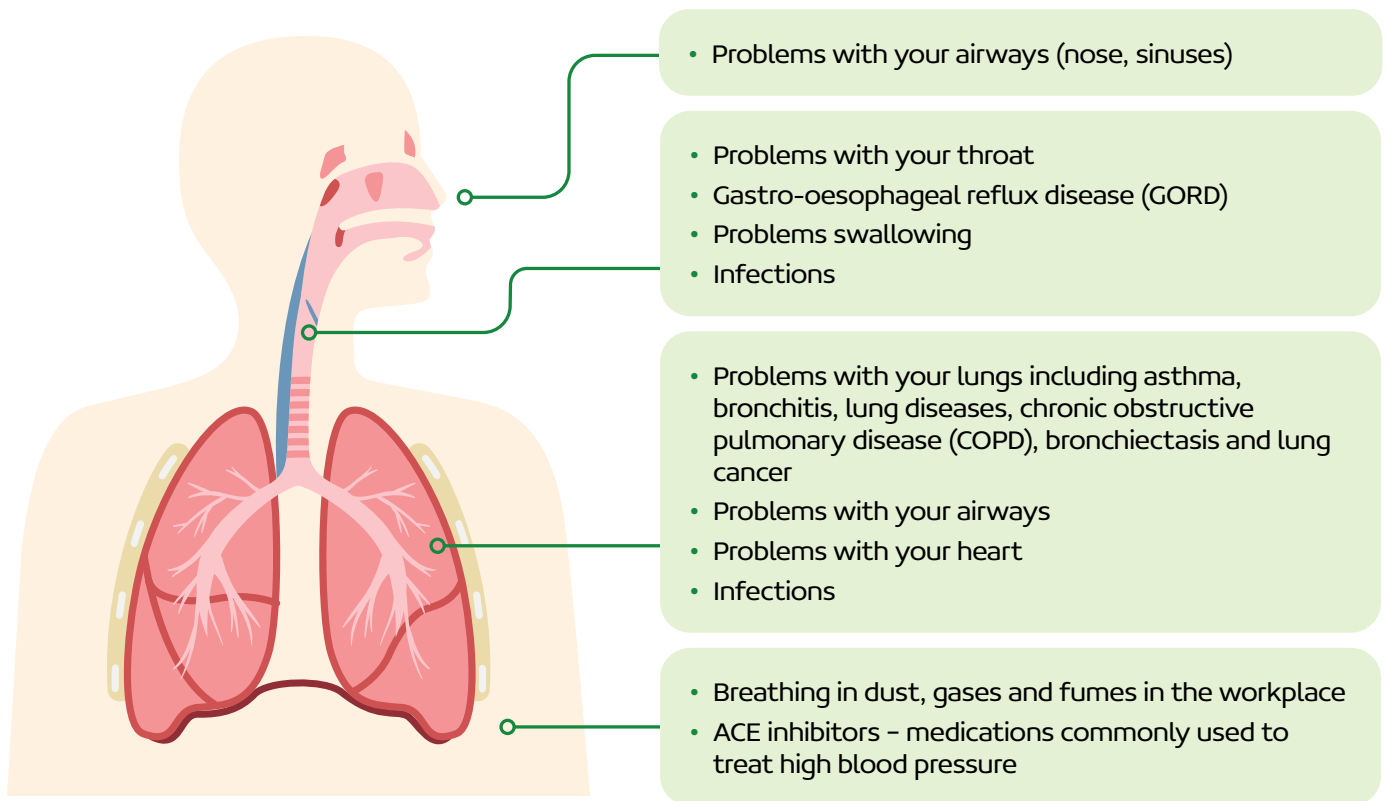
**If your GP hasn't arranged these tests, you can ask:**

***"I read that a chest X-ray and lung-function test is recommended for people with a chronic cough. Do you think this is something I should have done and if not, why?"***

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

### 3 Discover the cause of your chronic cough

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



### 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



[Click here](#) to find out more about **potential treatment approaches**



[Click here](#) 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:

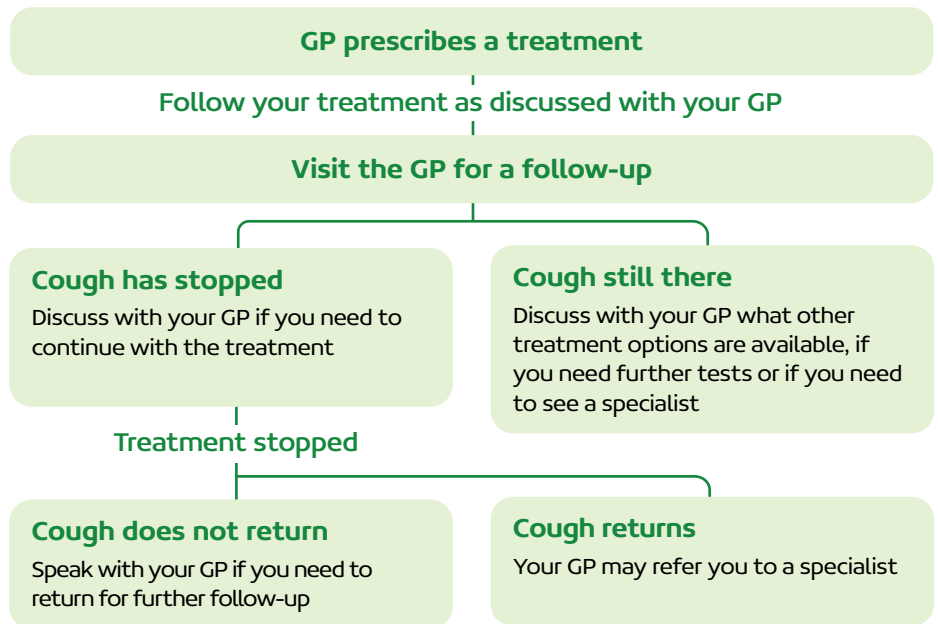
- Respiratory physician - lungs and breathing
- Ear, nose and throat specialist
- Gastroenterologist - stomach and digestion
- Speech pathologist - works with language and swallowing
- Neurologist - brain and nerve problems

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.

## 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 you are worried about your treatment or symptoms at any time, or if you haven't heard back after a test, make sure you contact your GP



## Questions to ask your GP

It's your body and your health, so it's important to ask questions and get answers.

### Tests

*Should I get a chest X-ray and a lung-function test? If not, why not?*

*Do I need any other tests?*

*How do I get these tests and when should they be done by?  
Who will give me my results and when will I get them?*

*Are there any out-of-pocket costs?*

### Diagnosis and treatment

*What is the cause of my cough?*

*What treatments are available to manage it?*

*How will my cough improve with treatment?*

*Do I need to see a specialist? If so, who?*

*If my cough doesn't improve, what other treatment options are there?*

*When do I need to book a follow-up appointment?*

*What else can I do to help manage my cough?*

Don't let the stigma of coughing get in the way of discovering the cause of your cough and finding a treatment that works for you.

# 5 Steps to assessing and managing your chronic cough

Coughing most days lasting more than 8 weeks

1

Speak with your GP

2

Undergo tests ordered by your GP

3

Discover the cause of your cough

4

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

5

Book follow-up appointments with your GP and other healthcare professionals you have been referred to

## FURTHER INFORMATION AND SUPPORT

### Lung Foundation Australia services

- Information and Support Team
- Lung disease information resources
- Education webinars
- Silicosis Support Nurse and Social Worker
- Support groups
- Peer-to-peer connections
- Pulmonary rehabilitation information

[lungfoundation.com.au](https://lungfoundation.com.au) | Freecall 1800 654 301 | [enquiries@lungfoundation.com.au](mailto:enquiries@lungfoundation.com.au)

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