

FitFacts®



Cough

DO YOU FIND YOURSELF SPENDING AN INORDINATE AMOUNT OF TIME COUGHING? IF SO, YOU'RE NOT ALONE. IN FACT, A COUGH IS ONE OF THE TOP REASONS THAT PEOPLE VISIT THEIR HEALTH CARE PROVIDER. READ ON TO LEARN THE COMMON CAUSES OF A COUGH AND WHAT YOU CAN DO ABOUT YOURS

Why do I cough?

Your body has something called “cough receptors” that are found in the ears, throat, lungs, stomach, diaphragm, and heart. When these receptors are stimulated, your body responds by coughing.

What aggravates these cough receptors?

A variety of things can trigger a cough. Here are the top offenders:

1. **Post-nasal drainage**—Sinus drainage that drips down the back of the throat can cause a pretty irritating cough. If you have post-nasal ‘drip,’ you may have a runny nose, feel dripping in the back of your throat, or you may clear your throat often. Colds, sinus infections, and environmental allergies are the main causes of post-nasal drainage.
2. **Asthma**—Coughing, especially at night, is a common symptom of asthma. Wheezing and shortness of breath are usually part of the package, too. Asthma is mostly caused by genetic factors, but may flare-up because of colds, respiratory infections, or irritants in the air.
3. **Acid Reflux**—The acidity of stomach juices that go up into the throat can cause a bothersome cough. People with reflux may also complain of heartburn or a sour taste in the mouth. Dietary factors (like alcohol, carbonated beverages, and spicy foods—to name a few) smoking, and obesity all trigger acid reflux.
4. **Respiratory infection**—Sometimes a cough from a respiratory infection will remain 2-8 weeks longer after all of the other symptoms have resolved. This typically resolves on its own, though certain medications can make it less annoying.
5. **Medications**—“ACE Inhibitors” are a category of blood pressure medication that are best known for causing a nagging, dry cough in some people.
6. **Chronic bronchitis**—This is the typical “smokers cough” most often caused by. . . you guessed it—SMOKING (though it can also be caused by long-term exposure to dust and other fumes). People who have this generally cough up a lot of clear phlegm as well.
7. **Environmental irritant**—Dust, mold, pollen, perfumes, smoke, and other fragrances can be respiratory irritants. This is especially common for people who already have allergies or asthma.

How should I treat my cough?

Your treatment will depend upon the cause of your cough. Your health care provider can help you determine why you are coughing and what, if any, medications you should take.

What can I do to prevent a cough?

- **If you smoke, STOP!**
- If you don't smoke, great! Try to stay away from second-hand sources of smoke.
- Know your triggers. If there is something that really gets your cough going, try to avoid it as much as you can.
- Wear a face mask when you are around irritating fumes or air particles.
- Control seasonal or environmental allergies with medication and/or by reducing your exposure to allergens in the home and outside.
- Wash your hands to prevent the spread of colds and other respiratory infections.
- Keep your body healthy with a [balanced diet](#) and [regular exercise](#)

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

[American Council on Exercise](#)

Silvestri, R.C. & Weinberger, S.E., *Evaluation of subacute and chronic cough in adults*. In UpToDate, Basow, DS (Ed), UpToDate, Waltham, MA, 02453.