Cough: patient education guide

A plain-language guide to cough patterns, common causes, assessment, warning signs and Ontario resources.

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General health information only. This guide does not diagnose a condition or replace an assessment by a qualified clinician.

Start with the big picture

A cough is a protective reflex and a symptom rather than a diagnosis. Acute cough is usually up to 3 weeks, subacute cough lasts more than 3 and less than 8 weeks, and chronic cough in adults lasts 8 weeks or longer. Children use different age-specific pathways.

Common presentations

- Dry or tickly cough
- Wet or productive cough with mucus
- Cough after a respiratory infection
- Night-time, exercise or cold-air cough
- Cough with wheeze, breathlessness, fever, chest pain, hoarseness or reflux symptoms

How clinicians assess it

A clinician may review timing, triggers, exposures, medicines, smoking or vaping, fever, breathlessness, swallowing, pregnancy and chronic conditions. Depending on the situation, assessment may include oxygen saturation, chest X-ray, spirometry, infection testing or another targeted test.

Medication discussions only

A clinician or pharmacist may discuss symptom-support products, inhaled medicines when asthma or COPD is present, reflux or allergy treatment when indicated, antibiotics for selected bacterial infections, or cough-control therapy for refractory cough. This guide does not recommend a medication or dose.

Self-management and prevention

- Rest, fluids and a comfortable room may help.
- Honey may soothe cough for adults and children over 1 year; never give honey to an infant under 1 year.
- Avoid tobacco smoke, vaping aerosols, strong fragrances and avoidable fumes.
- Cover coughs, clean hands and improve ventilation when possible.
- Keep a private timeline of symptoms, triggers and warning signs.

When to get help

Call 911 for severe breathing difficulty, blue or grey lips, confusion, collapse, severe chest pain or a child struggling to breathe. Seek prompt assessment for coughing up blood, significant breathlessness, a rapidly worsening cough, dehydration, high or persistent fever, a new cough after choking, repeated pneumonia, unexplained weight loss or night sweats.

Ontario care and coverage

OHIP may insure medically necessary physician and hospital services, but exact tests and settings matter. Prescription medicines outside hospital are generally not covered by OHIP; ODB, OHIP+, Trillium, Exceptional Access and private insurance depend on eligibility and the exact product. Allied-health services may be public, program-dependent or private. Confirm fees and referral rules directly.

Sources and limitations

Canadian sources are listed first. U.S., U.K. and academic sources supplement the Canadian context. Links were opened and verified on 20 November 2026. This guide uses original wording and does not reproduce third-party text.

Lung Health Foundation — chronic cough: https://www.lung.ca/lung-diseases/chronic-cough/

Lung Health Foundation — causes of chronic cough: https://www.lung.ca/lung-diseases/chronic-cough/causes-of-chronic-cough/

HealthLink BC — coughs age 12 and older: https://www.healthlinkbc.ca/healthwise/coughs-age-12-and-older

Government of Canada — respiratory infectious diseases: https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/diseases/respiratory-infectious-diseases-reduce-spread-personal-protective-measures.html

Canadian Paediatric Society — croup: https://cps.ca/en/documents/position/acute-management-of-croup

Choosing Wisely Canada — paediatrics: https://choosingwiselycanada.org/recommendation/paediatrics/

CMAJ — postinfectious cough in adults: https://www.cmaj.ca/content/cmaj/196/5/E157.full.pdf

Ontario Health — infectious diseases: https://www.ontariohealth.ca/clinical/infectious-diseases

British Thoracic Society — chronic cough: https://www.brit-thoracic.org.uk/clinical-resources/clinical-statements/cough-adults/

NICE NG120 — acute cough: https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/ng120/resources/cough-acute-antimicrobial-prescribing-pdf-66141652166341

NHS — cough: https://www.nhs.uk/symptoms/cough/

CDC — chest cold acute bronchitis: https://www.cdc.gov/acute-bronchitis/about/index.html

American Thoracic Society — cough: https://www.thoracic.org/patients/patient-resources/resources/PHSCough.pdf

CHEST — chronic cough in children: https://journal.chestnet.org/article/S0012369220303251/pdf

NCBI Bookshelf — cough evaluation and management: https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK493221/