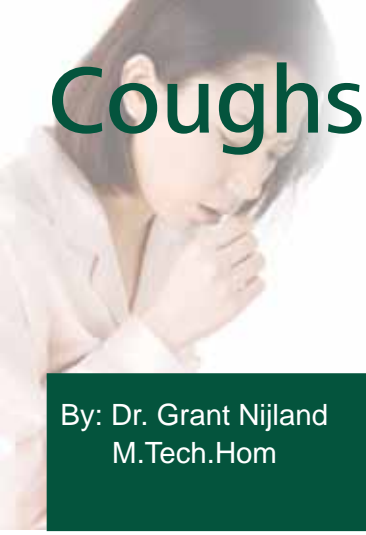


# Coughs



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With winter fast approaching, the incidents of colds and flus are ever prevalent. Coughing is most often associated with winter illnesses but can also be symptomatic of several other diseases that could affect a person. In this issue, we will be discussing the different types of coughs, their care and possible treatment.

The main function of the cough reflex is to protect the lungs and airways by removing excess mucous and stopping foreign material from entering the lungs. Coughing in general should not be suppressed entirely as the cause needs to be determined so as to stop a cough entirely.

**PLEASE NOTE: a patient presenting with a persistent cough that has lasted more than two to three weeks or that is accompanied by a high temperature, chest pains or blood in the sputum must be referred to a medical practitioner.**

## Types and Causes of coughs:

There are generally two types of coughs: dry and wet. Dry coughs are often hacking in nature and wet coughs are productive and assist in bringing up phlegm. In young children, a hollow barking cough accompanied by difficulty in breathing is generally termed croup.

A cough may be a symptom of a disorder of the respiratory system or due to another cause. Because of the varied causes of coughs investigation may be necessary to determine the root. Dry coughs are often a result of a post-nasal drips, or follow a viral infection. They may also be as a result of certain drugs such as ACE inhibitors and  $\beta$ -Blockers, or following recent exposure to dust, smoke or other pollutants. Gastro-esophageal reflux disease may also cause coughing.

Wet coughs are often associated with acute and chronic bronchitis and may be a symptom of pneumonia. Wet coughs are characterised by expectoration of thick yellow to green phlegm. The colour of the mucous is indicative of the severity of the infection.

If a cough lasts for more than two to three weeks, medical attention is important. Smokers often have a 'smoker's cough' which is a loud, hacking productive cough that is often worse in the morning. In South Africa, tuberculosis is a disease that affects a large percentage of the population, a chronic persistent productive cough can be a symptom of tuberculosis and medical intervention is extremely important.

Psychological causes of coughing, termed psychogenic cough, can be seen in some people when they are nervous.

## Treatment of coughs:

In treating coughs remember to look at the cause of the cough as well as the specific symptom that you would like to reduce. A dry cough presents with throat irritation, a wet cough presents with mucous production and in most cases there will be an infective element that needs to be treated, be it bacterial as in acute bronchitis or viral as in colds and flu. There is of course no infective element associated with coughs due to drugs or pollutants.

The general mechanisms of action required from cough medicines are discussed below.

- Cough suppressants generally are also known as antitussives and these reduce the cough reflex. Because coughing removes foreign and infective material from the lungs, cough suppressants should only be used to treat dry coughs. Codeine is a frequently used cough suppressant which unfortunately has a number of side-effects. Codeine can be addictive, it dries mucous membranes which can further irritate the membranes, can cause constipation and people can actually build up a level of tolerance to codeine.
- Demulcents contain ingredients that soothe irritated mucous membranes and so help to relieve coughs. Honey, glycerin, liquorice, marshmallow root and slippery elm are some natural demulcents. Lozenges generally have a demulcent action.
- Expectorants can be used for dry and wet coughs. Expectorants increase the respiratory fluid and then have a demulcent effect on the mucous membranes and they decrease the thickness of the secretions which in turn assists in the expulsion of the secretions from the respiratory tract. Expulsion of the secretions helps to inhibit bacterial growth and allows the membranes to return to natural state more quickly. Expectorant action is mainly seen in the lungs where the mucus collects and do not really have any effect on the irritation in the throat.
- Mucolytics are often used in the treatment of wet coughs as they reduce the viscosity of secretions and when in combination with an expectorant helps to expel the excessive mucus.
- Bronchodilators can help to relieve cough because the constriction of the bronchi due to irritation or infection result in reduced passage of air and a build of mucus. A bronchodilator accompanied by an expectorant can therefore relieve cough effectively.

A treatment option for a cough can be chosen from orthodox / allopathic medicine, naturopathy, phytotherapy, homeopathy or Tibb. There are a large variety of orthodox / allopathic cough medicines available. Many alternate remedies tend to be fairly specific when single remedies are chosen but there are a number of very effective combination formulations that can assist in treating coughs.

Herbal formulations for cough have the same mechanism of action as the orthodox / allopathic formulations but do not have the same side effect profile. Tibb Health Sciences' Kofcare syrup has anti-tussive and expectorant actions and can be used for the management of wet and dry coughs. Tibb-Dibekof syrup has the same mechanism of action as Kofcare but is specifically formulated for diabetic patients. Chest-eeze syrup has bronchodilatory and expectorant actions and assists in the management of bronchitis and asthma. Tibb's Throat and Cough lozenges have a demulcent action and relieve both sore throats and cough.

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