



What You Need to Know

What causes coughs in children?

Most coughs in children are brought on by the viruses that cause colds and the flu. Other causes include allergies, exposure to smoke or other irritants in the air, sinus infection and asthma. Rarely, pertussis (whooping cough) or pneumonia is the cause of a prolonged cough.

What causes coughs in adults?

The most common causes of coughs in adults include colds and the flu, asthma, cigarette smoke, and post-nasal drip from allergies. Less commonly, acid reflux disease (GERD), exposure to irritants in the air, pertussis (whooping cough) and pneumonia can cause prolonged cough.

When do coughs need antibiotics?

Coughs generally only need treatment with antibiotics in two cases: pneumonia and pertussis (whooping cough). Chest colds (bronchitis) are usually caused by a virus and do not respond to antibiotic treatment.

Taking antibiotics for a cough will not prevent pneumonia. In fact, taking unnecessary antibiotics puts your family at risk for developing resistant infections later. (more: [link to main Get Smart page](#))

What about yellow or green mucus?

The color of mucus does not reliably predict whether or not you have a bacterial infection or need antibiotics. It's normal for mucus in the breathing tubes (bronchi) to change color from clear to yellow, green or white when your body's immune system is fighting a virus.

Cough Treatment Guide for Parents

Most coughs in children are caused by viruses and may last for two to three weeks. It is common for toddlers to have 6-8 viral cough illnesses each year. These coughs will generally clear up on their own.

Please note: a higher than normal rate of pertussis (whooping cough) has been reported in Oregon during the last few years. Pertussis causes a severe cough with a seal-like "whoop" on inhale. Pertussis is very contagious and should be treated with antibiotics.

Medical attention is recommended for:

- Difficulty breathing
- Breathing much faster than usual
- Wheezing (high-pitched sound on exhale)



Oregon AWARE Cough Treatment Guide



- Child's lips or nails turning blue
- Severe cough with seal-like "whoop" on intake of breath
- Fever of 100.4°F or above if the child is less than three months old
- Fever of 104°F or above if the child is more than three months old

Otherwise...

- Avoid second-hand cigarette smoke
- Offer plenty of fluids
- Get lots of rest
- Steam from a bath or shower may help loosen mucus
- Give acetaminophen (Tylenol or generic equivalent) for fever or pain. Ibuprofen (Advil, Motrin or generic equivalent) may be given if your child is over 6 months. Ibuprofen should not be given if the child is dehydrated or vomiting continuously. Over-the-counter decongestants should not be given to children under the age of 3 years. Aspirin should never be used in children with fever due to the risk of stomach upset, intestinal bleeding and Reye syndrome

Adult Cough Treatment Guide

In adults, most coughs that aren't caused by smoking are brought on by the viruses that cause colds and the flu. Viral cough illness may last for two to three weeks, but it will usually clear up on its own.

Please note: a higher than normal rate of pertussis (whooping cough) has been reported in Oregon during the autumn of 2003. Pertussis causes severe cough with a seal-like "whoop" on inhale. It can affect adults who have been vaccinated in the past. Pertussis is very contagious and should be treated with antibiotics.

Medical attention is recommended for:

- Difficulty breathing
- Breathing much faster than usual
- Wheezing (high-pitched sound on exhale)
- Severe cough with seal-like "whoop" on intake of breath
- Fever of 104°F or above
- Cough that lasts longer than three weeks.

Otherwise...

- Avoid cigarette smoke
- Drink plenty of fluids
- Get lots of rest
- Breathe steam from a bath or shower to help loosen mucus
- Take acetaminophen (Tylenol or generic equivalent) or ibuprofen (Advil, Motrin or generic equivalent) as needed for fever or pain.