



## Common Health Conditions series

# Cough

A cough may seem like a common condition to have, but simply, it is an action of the body to get rid of irritants in the air passages. Most people experience cough, along with a cold or flu (also known as an acute cough). However, some people may suffer from a chronic cough, defined as lasting for more than two months and for children, lasting for more than a month. Chronic cough needs to be treated as it can strain the body and severely affect the quality of life.

### What Cause a Cough?

It is not always easy to identify the underlying cause of the cough, thus a cough is often treated as a symptom. The more common underlying causes are:

**Irritants** – Should the air passage be continually exposed to irritants, it can result in a chronic cough. For instance, cigarette smoke, dust, pollen, pet dander, chemicals, dry air and air pollutants.

**Health conditions** – Health conditions that commonly cause cough are asthma, emphysema, rhinitis, and chronic bronchitis.

**Infections** – Infections of upper respiratory tract such as sinusitis, throat and ear infections may result in prolonged periods of cough.

**Reflux** – The regurgitation of acids from the stomach up to the esophagus, also known as

gastro esophageal reflux, results in a reflex cough action.

Usually a doctor will ask about the presence of phlegm, to determine if it is an infectious cough.

### Who is at Risk of Chronic Cough?

Why do some people seem to be perpetually coughing? There are various factors that increase the likelihood of suffering from chronic cough, such as:

**1 Smoking** – Also known as a ‘smoker’s cough’, it may progress from a dry cough to one with phlegm. Usually the cough is more severe in the morning as the hair-like cells known as cilia attempt to catch the toxins from tobacco smoke and the cough is a reaction to remove these toxins. In the day, smoking paralyzes the cilia and the toxins enter the lungs while in evening and during sleep, the cilia repair themselves. Second-hand smoke, such as seen in children of parents who smoke, are associated with a higher incidence of chronic cough. Chronic cough is also a key symptom of lung cancer.

**2 Increased exposure to allergens or irritants** – Prolonged exposure to allergens such as pet dander or irritants such as air pollutants from haze or occupation, can lead to chronic cough in some individuals.

**3 Infections and health conditions –** Patients who suffer from infections or health conditions such as chronic bronchitis and postnasal drip, are more prone to chronic cough.

### Complications and Prevention of Cough

It is not practical to try not to cough and in a sense, it is beneficial in that it is the body's mechanism to remove irritants. However, chronic cough can harm our body, for instance:

- Headache
- Dizziness
- Insomnia
- Hoarse voice
- Exhaustion and fatigue
- Disruption in daily activities
- Vomiting
- Excessive sweating
- Urinary incontinence (loss of bladder control)
- Minor bleeding in the eye
- Hernia
- Fractured ribs

To prevent the onset of chronic cough, one important factor is to stop smoking and avoid second hand smoke, in particular for people with asthma, chronic lung disease, children and those suffering from environmental allergies. It is also advisable to avoid contact with those who have bronchitis or pneumonia. For those with health conditions that make one more vulnerable to chronic cough, prompt treatment of the condition is appropriate. In a study conducted in Singapore, a diet high in fiber and flavonoids, such as fruit and soy, was associated to help prevent chronic cough in both smokers and nonsmokers. In particular, the presence of phlegm in cough may be due to oxidative stress-mediated inflammation and thus a diet rich in antioxidants/ flavonoids can reduce the oxidation. Fruits such as apples, grapes and pears contain flavonoids quercetin and/or catechin.

### Treatment of Cough

It is easier to treat a cough if the underlying cause is known. However, in most cases, cough medication is prescribed which either

suppresses the cough (suppressants) or thin the mucus so that it can be more easily expelled (expectorants). It is important to note that there is no evidence of the efficacy of cough medicine and it is not recommended for children below the age of 6 years. In certain cases, antibiotics may be prescribed but patients should be aware that antibiotics will not work if it is a viral infection. Moreover, antibiotics decrease beneficial bacteria and its use has been associated with the development of antibiotic-resistant bacterial strains.

TCM approach for cough often begins with a diagnosis of the different kinds of cough, broadly distinguished between a 'hot phlegm' cough, a 'cold phlegm' cough or a 'wind dry' cough. Thereafter, appropriate formulation of herbal medication, considering the different symptoms of the patient, will be prescribed, to remove heat from the lung, dissolve phlegm, reduce inflammation and infection, improve circulation, relieve bronchospasm and strengthen the immune system. Some TCM Physicians will also apply specific massage



or acupuncture techniques, to enhance the treatment effect. However, when it comes to children, TCM treatments may not even involve the intake of oral medication, but rather using non-invasive external therapies such as Pediatric Massage, Herbal Lights and so on, therefore eliminating risk associated with side effects of prescription.

Although a cough is a common condition, seek treatment if you have a chronic cough to prevent complications and improve your quality of life. For parents with young children, always remember that faster cough relief means lesser damage to the lung of your little ones!