

Cough in children

Cough is common, particularly in winter and spring, and frequently worries parents.

Cough can be recurrent, with symptom free periods between episodes of cough. Or, it can be persistent and present every day for months or years.

Coughing protects the lungs against accidental inhalation of particles as well as removing excess secretions. Inflammation in the airways such as infection or irritation such as smoke will cause cough.

The most common causes of recurrent cough are:

- 1) Repeated viral respiratory infections, and
- 2) Asthma

Viral infections

Viral infections are very common.

Young children usually have four to eight viral respiratory infections a year with cough as a main feature. There is usually a sore throat, minor fever and a runny nose as well. The cough is 'dry' at first and may become 'moist' after a few days. It occurs day and night and often disturbs the sleep of the child and the parents. The cough usually lasts seven to 14 days, but sometimes persists for weeks or months.

Children exposed to cigarette smoke have more frequent respiratory infections than children living in a smoke free household.

Asthma

Some children have a recurrent cough not associated with viral infection. The cough is often dry, often worse at night and made worse by cold air and exercise. There may be a history of hay fever, eczema or asthma in the parents.

If there is a wheeze and the cough responds to bronchodilators (asthma relievers like Ventolin or Bricanyl) then the diagnosis is asthma. If there is no wheeze, the diagnosis is 'irritable airways'.

Sometimes bronchodilators are helpful and cough suppressants may help at night. Intal or Tilade inhalers may help reduce the airways irritability after a few days of use. Most of these children do not develop asthma.

Control of dust mites and removing milk and chocolate from the diet may be tried but is often not helpful.

If there are symptoms of hay fever (itchy nose, throat and eyes, sneezing, runny and blocked nose) one of the non-sedating antihistamines or an asthma preventer medicine inhaled into the nose twice daily will often help.

Danger signs

Danger signs for serious chest infection in children include (urgent medical attention):

- Short of breath at rest or breathing faster than usual at rest;
- Skin sucking in around the

collar bone or ribs when a child breaths in;

- A weak lethargic child;
- Unable to drink or breast-feed due to cough or fast breathing.

With any persistent or unusual cough, see your GP for advice.

Adapted with permission of the Cowra Division of General Practice.