Guide to Cough Symptoms

Note: This information is not intended to replace the services of your health care provider. Always consult your provider immediately if you are concerned about your cough and follow his or her instructions.

Cough
What is it?
A noisy expulsion of air from the lungs. Coughing is one of the protective mechanisms the body uses to rid itself of substances within the respiratory system. A cough may be “productive” (that is, it produces sputum [phlegm]) or “dry.”

Start

Do you have a postnasal drip (irritation at the back of your throat), early morning vomiting, and/or sinus pain?

- Yes
- No

Yes

A dry (nonproductive) cough may be an early sign of heart failure or a side effect of taking an ACE inhibitor, a type of medication that is often prescribed for heart failure.

No

Is your cough productive (that is, does it produce phlegm)?

- Yes
- No

Yes

Is your cough constant or nearly so?

- No
- Yes

Yes

Does the phlegm have a yellow tinge?

- No
- Yes

Yes

Is the phlegm blood-tinged?

- No
- Yes

Your symptoms require evaluation. Consult a doctor without delay! If you also have a fever, you may have pneumonia. If your symptoms developed suddenly and you are experiencing pain and difficulty breathing, you may have a pulmonary embolism. Lung cancer may also cause symptoms of a constant, productive cough and blood-tinged sputum; you are at risk for lung cancer if you have smoked for many years.

Several respiratory conditions, including pneumonia and acute bronchitis, an inflammation of the mucous membranes lining the airways of the lungs, are characterized by an acute, productive cough. Consult your doctor.

If you are unable to diagnose your symptoms using this chart and/or your cough persists for more than 4 days or worsens, consult your doctor without delay!