

# Cough

Different things may cause a cough. A cough may be a:

- sign of a chest infection
- symptom of a cancer in or close to the lungs
- side effect of radiotherapy to the chest
- side effect of some chemotherapy, targeted or immunotherapy drugs.

Always tell your doctor or nurse if you have a cough so they can find out the cause. Certain things, for example an infection, will need to be treated straightaway.

The treatment depends on the cause. If a cough is caused by infection, antibiotics will usually get rid of it. If it caused by the cancer, then treating the cancer may improve the cough. Sometimes a short course of radiotherapy to the lung helps. If a cough is a side effect of treatment it usually improves when treatment finishes.

Sometimes a cough and breathlessness can be caused by inflammation or scarring (fibrosis) in the lungs. This can be a late effect of radiotherapy to the chest. Drugs called steroids are sometimes used to treat this.

When a cough is ongoing it can be uncomfortable and upsetting. It may interrupt your sleep or interfere with eating. There are different things that may help.

## Tips for managing a cough

- Ask your doctor or nurse if there are any treatments or medicines that could help your cough.
- If your doctor prescribes antibiotics take them exactly as prescribed and finish the course.
- Always tell your doctor or nurse if your cough gets worse, or if you start coughing up mucous (phlegm).
- Ask your doctor if physiotherapy could improve your cough. A physiotherapist can show you the best way to clear your airways.
- If you have a dry, irritable cough your doctor may be able to prescribe a cough medicine to help.
- Sometimes a steam inhalation or breathing in salt water (saline) through a small machine called a nebuliser can help. The machine turns the saline into a fine mist, so you can breathe it deeply into your lungs.
- Codeine or morphine are drugs that are used to control pain. But doctors may also prescribe them to relieve an ongoing cough even if you do not have pain.
- Tell your doctor straightaway if you cough up any blood.

**Local resources:**

Resource	Contact details

**Further information**

[www.macmillan.org.uk/information-and-support/lung-cancer/treating/supportive-and-other-treatments/controlling-symptoms.html](http://www.macmillan.org.uk/information-and-support/lung-cancer/treating/supportive-and-other-treatments/controlling-symptoms.html)

[www.macmillan.org.uk/information-and-support/coping/side-effects-and-symptoms/breathlessness](http://www.macmillan.org.uk/information-and-support/coping/side-effects-and-symptoms/breathlessness)

Our booklets and leaflets are available to order free on [be.macmillan.org.uk](http://be.macmillan.org.uk)

- Managing the symptoms of cancer
- Understanding lung cancer
- Understanding radiotherapy

**More information and support**

If you have more questions or would like to talk to someone, call the Macmillan Support Line free on **0808 808 00 00**, 7 days a week, 8am to 8pm, or visit [macmillan.org.uk](http://macmillan.org.uk)

Deaf or hard of hearing? Call using NGT (Text Relay) on **18001 0808 808 00 00**, or use the NGT Lite app. Speak another language? Telephone interpreters are available. Please tell us in English the language you would like to use.

We produce information in a range of formats and languages. To order these visit [macmillan.org.uk/otherformats](http://macmillan.org.uk/otherformats) or call our support line.