

Cough

This information is about having a cough. Coughing helps to clear our airways. But a cough that does not go away can be distressing and tiring. It can interfere with your daily life. For example, coughing may [affect your sleep](#).

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

- a sign of a chest infection
- a symptom of a cancer in or close to the lungs
- a late effect of radiotherapy to the chest.

Always tell your healthcare team if you have a cough so they can find out the cause. This means they will know the best way to treat it.

Tell your doctor straight away if you cough up any blood. You may have tests to find out what is causing the bleeding.

The treatment will depend on the cause. For example, if you have a chest infection, your doctor will prescribe antibiotics. If your cough is caused by the cancer, then treating the cancer may help. This may be with radiotherapy, chemotherapy or other [cancer treatment](#).

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 area. Your doctor may prescribe steroids to treat this.

Tips for managing a cough

- Make sure you drink enough. Drinking plenty of fluid can make mucus thinner.
- Always tell your doctor or nurse if your cough gets worse, or if you start coughing up yellow or green mucus (phlegm). You may have an infection and need antibiotics.
- If your healthcare team prescribes antibiotics, take them exactly as prescribed, and finish the course.
- Codeine or morphine are drugs that are usually used to control pain. But they can also be used to treat an ongoing cough, even if you do not have pain.
- If you have a dry, irritable cough, your healthcare team may prescribe a cough medicine to help. You can buy some cough medicines at supermarkets or pharmacies. Talk to your doctor or pharmacist before you buy anything to help with a cough.
- Sometimes a steam inhalation or breathing in salt water (saline) through a nebuliser can help. This can help clear thick mucus from the airways.
- If you find it difficult to cough up mucus, a physiotherapist may be able to show you ways to make that easier. Ask your doctor about seeing a physiotherapist.
- Smoking increases your risk of lung problems. If you smoke your doctor will usually advise you to [stop smoking](#). It can be difficult to stop smoking, especially when you are stressed. Using the [NHS Stop Smoking Services](#) improves your chances of success. Your GP can also give you support and advice.
- [Relaxation exercises](#) may help you manage a cough.

Macmillan Cancer Support resources

We have more information on our [website](#), including [audiobooks](#). Or you can order our free booklets and leaflets on orders.macmillan.org.uk such as:

- MAC11671 [Managing the symptoms of cancer](#)
- MAC11632 [Understanding lung cancer](#)
- MAC17499_ER [Lung cancer](#) – Easy read
- MAC11640 [Understanding radiotherapy](#)

We produce information in a [range of formats](#) and [languages](#). To order these, visit our website or call our support line on **0808 808 00 00**.

Further Macmillan 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 to [chat online](#) to one of our team.

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

If you want to share your experiences or ask questions, you can find others who understand on our [Online Community](#). Our free [Macmillan Buddy service](#) can arrange weekly calls with a friendly volunteer who understands what you're going through.

Other useful contact details

- Asthma and Lung UK – visit www.asthmaandlung.org.uk or call **0300 222 5800**
- The Roy Castle Lung Cancer Foundation – visit www.roycastle.org or call **0333 323 7200**

Notes and questions
