



University Hospitals Birmingham
NHS Foundation Trust



Building healthier lives

UHB is a no smoking Trust

This leaflet is about cough suppression. It is about trying to stop a dry tickly cough. It is not about clearing mucus from the chest. If you have a mucus problem you may find the 'active cycle of breathing technique' helpful. A respiratory physiotherapist can also provide further advice.

A helpful cough is one that clears mucus from your chest. An unhelpful cough is a dry tickly, irritable one.

A cough helps to protect your airway. There are nerve endings in the lining of your trachea that stimulate a cough. If anything other than air goes down your trachea you will trigger a cough. Like when you take a drink and cough and say it has gone down the wrong way. This is your body protecting your airway.

Cough suppression:

Coughing needs to be reduced or controlled if it is dry and does not clear any sections. It is best to avoid lots of repeated strenuous coughing because it can cause tiredness, stop secretion clearance, cause strain on your pelvic floor leading to difficulty with continence, and keep you awake at night. Repeated coughing can cause further irritation to the airways.

When you feel a cough coming, ask yourself is it wet or dry?

If it is wet:

Use airway clearance techniques as advised by your respiratory physiotherapist.

If it is dry:

As soon as you cough or feel as though you are about to cough try some of these techniques:

Swallow once.

Nose breathing can help to settle irritable airways.

Take a small breath in and out through your nose. Hold your breath for a few seconds.

You can also try blowing out through pursed lips. This is like blowing out through a straw.

Sipping water every 10 minutes can help with tickly coughs.

Suck hard boiled sweets or ice cube or frozen grapes.

Avoid coughing triggers – if your cough is triggered by airborne irritants such as dust, smoke, perfumes, cleaning products etc. then try to avoid these as best as you can or find alternatives for them. Change aerosol sprays to roll-on if possible.

If you notice upper airway burning or throat soreness you may be suffering from reflux. Symptoms of reflux can cause be an irritable cough. You may need medication to help with this.

Avoid foods that worsen symptoms – some people find that some foods increase their cough or the thickness of their secretions. It is best to avoid these if you are affected. Cooking with spices and chilli can cause irritation.

Elevate your head at night as lying flat can make a chronic cough worse.

Frequent throat clearing can cause your vocal cords to become damaged and increase production of mucus.

You may not be aware you are clearing your throat frequently. You could ask people to help prompt you to stop.

If the problem is caused by a post nasal drip discuss this with you pharmacist or GP about any available treatment. You could also try nasal douching to help.

If you feel the need to clear your throat swallow instead or take a sip of cold water and swallow.

Please use the space below to write down any questions you may have and bring this with you to your next appointment.

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