FROM THE PARISH NURSE….

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SALEM UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

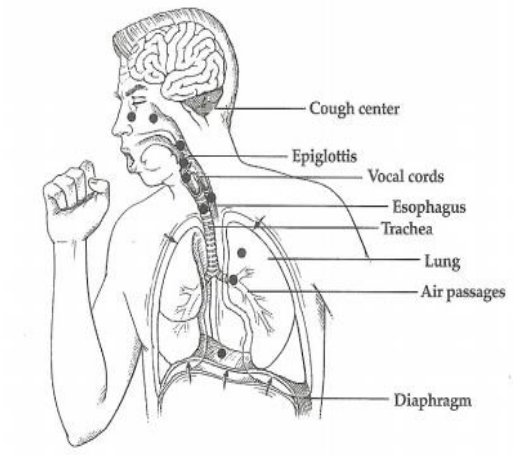
THE COUGH

A cough is normal protective reflex, designed to defend your respiratory system against irritants. However, a forceful or nagging cough can be painful and bothersome. Some of these coughs need your physician's attention. Others respond to simple self-care and the right medicine.

What Causes a Cough?

Here are some typical irritations that cause coughing:

- Infections, such as colds and flu
- Postnasal drip—an overproduction of mucus that slowly trickles from the back of your nose down into your throat
- Environmental irritants, such as cigarette smoke, smog, dust, home aerosol sprays, and cold or dry air
- Asthma, which inflames and constricts that air passages
- Gastroesophageal reflux—the backup of stomach acid into your esophagus (or, in rare cases, your lungs) when you lie down
- Medications, such as inhaled corticosteroids or certain medications prescribed for high blood pressure and heart disease
- Coughing itself. Sometimes there is no medical explanation for a cough. Some people cough to release nervous tension, gain attention, or express anger. Whatever the reason, one cough can irritate your throat and lead to another, setting up a vicious cycle



A cough begins when an irritant reaches one of the cough receptors in your nose, throat, or chest (see dots). The receptor sends a message to the cough center in your brain, signaling your body to cough. After you inhale, your epiglottis and vocal cords close tightly, trapping air within your lungs. Your abdominal and chest muscles contract forcefully, pushing against your diaphragm. Finally, your vocal cords and epiglottis open suddenly, allowing trapped air to explode outward.

Treatment

Dry, Hacking Coughs

These generally go away within 1 to 2 weeks. But if a persistent cough irritates your throat, suck on hard candy or cough drops, or drink tea sweetened with honey.

If a cough caused by gastroesophageal reflux disrupts your sleep, raise the head of your bed 6 to 8 inches. To temporarily reduce the frequency of your cough, take an over-the-counter cough suppressant. Although codeine is one of the most effective cough suppressants, it is a narcotic, so cough formulas containing codeine are available only by prescription in most states. Dextromethorphan is nearly as effective as codeine, with less risk of side effects.

Productive Coughs

A cough that brings up mucus helps remove irritants from your lungs and air passages. To thin mucus and make it easier to cough up, drink plenty of water. Using a humidifier or a vaporizer may also help loosen mucus.

It is best not to suppress a productive cough. However, if your cough continually disrupts your sleep, you can take just enough cough suppressant to decrease the frequency and severity of your cough, but not to get rid of it altogether.

Antihistamines may help dry up secretions associated with allergies, sinusitis, and postnasal drip, but they can make you sleepy. Do not take antihistamines in combination with alcohol or tranquilizers, or when you need to stay alert.

Serious Coughs

If your cough lasts longer than 2 or 3 weeks, see your physician. Managing a chronic cough requires careful evaluation and identification of a specific cause.

Litin, S. C., & Nanda, S. (2018). *Mayo Clinic family health book*. Rochester, MN:

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