



# Coughs in children

Coughing can be a sign of many problems. Your child's body uses coughing to clear the lungs and airways.



## CAUSES

Coughing itself is not the problem. What causes the cough is the problem.

Children usually get coughs from an infection in the nose and throat.

### Here are some other reasons for your child to cough:

- Asthma
- Bronchitis. This is a respiratory tract infection.
- A cold or the flu
- Croup
- Measles
- Smoking or secondhand smoke
- Swollen adenoids. (This can lead to an infection.)
- Whooping cough. A vaccine for this is part of the DTaP shot.

How to treat a cough depends on what kind it is, what caused it, and the other symptoms. Treat the cause and make the pain better.

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## TRIAGE QUESTIONS



Does your child have any of these problems with the cough?

- Blue color around the lips or fingernails
- Very bad wheezing
- Has a very hard time breathing
- Won't drink anything
- Acts very sleepy or sluggish
- Can't talk, make sounds, or swallow
- Coughs up blood
- The cough lasts after choking on food or other object.

**NO**

**YES**

**GET EMERGENCY MEDICAL CARE:  
CALL 911**



With a cough and a hard time breathing, is your child doing these things?

- Drooling
- Breathing through the mouth
- Sticking the chin out
- Gasping for air

**NO**

**YES**

**GET EMERGENCY MEDICAL CARE**



Did the cough start suddenly and last an hour or more without stopping?

**NO**

**YES**

**SEE DOCTOR**



With the cough, does your child have any of these problems?

- Wheezing
- Shortness of breath at rest
- Quick breathing
- Fever
- The cough sounds like a seal's bark.
- Throws up

**NO**

**YES**

**SEE DOCTOR**

**CONTINUE IN NEXT COLUMN**



Did your child miss having his or her DTaP shots? Does he or she have a fever and cough mostly at night?

**NO**

**YES**

**SEE DOCTOR**



Does your child cough up thick green, yellow, or rust-colored mucus?

**NO**

**YES**

**SEE DOCTOR**



Does your child have a cough and is he or she less than 3 months old?

**NO**

**YES**

**SEE DOCTOR**



Does your child have a rash? Has he or she been near someone with measles?

**NO**

**YES**

**CALL DOCTOR**



Has the cough lasted more than 2 weeks without getting better?

**NO**

**YES**

**CALL DOCTOR**

**USE SELF-CARE**



## SELF-CARE

- Give your child plenty of liquids, like water and clear soup. These help loosen mucus and soothe a sore throat. Fruit juices are good, but avoid soda or orange juice.
- Use a cool-mist vaporizer, especially in the bedroom. Use distilled (not tap) water. Put a humidifier on the furnace. Keep them very clean. Remember to change the filter on the humidifier.
- Sit with your child in the bathroom with the shower running. The steam can help thin the mucus. (If your child has asthma, do not follow this tip.)
- Raise your child's head when resting if he or she has a cold or respiratory infection.
- Put your child's head lower than his or her chest if the infection is in the lungs.
- Have your child suck on cough drops, hard candies, or suckers. Give suckers that have safety loops instead of hard sticks. (Don't give these to a child under 4 years old.)

- If your baby coughs after eating:
  - Have your baby sit up when he or she eats.
  - If your baby drinks from a bottle, burp your baby after each ounce of formula. Burp the baby every few minutes when breastfeeding.
  - Don't lie the baby down after feeding.
- Ask your child's doctor or pharmacist what kind of cough medicine is OK to give your child.
- Don't smoke. Keep your child away from secondhand smoke. Tell your child not to smoke.
- Keep your child away from chemical gases that can hurt their lungs.
- When your child is better, promote exercise on a regular basis. Your child's breathing muscles will get stronger. Your child will fight infection better, too.

- Keep your child's shots up to date.
- For fever and aches, give your child acetaminophen or ibuprofen. Make sure you give the right kind and dose for your child's weight. **(Note:** Do not give aspirin. Aspirin and other medicines that have salicylates have been linked to Reye's Syndrome.)
- Do not use cough medicines for any children under 6 years old.
- If your child gets bronchitis easily, keep him or her away from air pollution as much as you can. Use air conditioning and air filters. Have your child wear a filter mask over his or her nose and mouth if needed. Keep your child inside when air pollution is heavy.
- Call the doctor if your child doesn't get better in 24 hours.



## PREVENT COUGH & CHOKING FROM SOMETHING CAUGHT IN THE THROAT OR WINDPIPE

- Keep coins, paper clips, balloons, and small toy parts out of the reach of babies and small children. Anything that is small enough to fit through the center of a paper towel roll is a choking hazard for babies and small children.
- Watch your child when they eat. For a child less than 4 years old, give soft, cut-up foods. **DON'T** give foods in the list below to a child less than 4 years old.
  - Peanuts and other nuts
  - Popcorn
  - Hot dogs (even when cut in round pieces)
  - Raisins and other dried fruit
  - Raw carrots, celery, apples, and pears
  - Chewing gum
  - Peanut butter from a spoon
  - Hard candy, sunflower or pumpkin seeds, and watermelon with seeds