

## **ACUTE COUGHS & SELF-CARE**

Many students commonly have problems with a cough, especially during the fall and winter months. A cough is often part of a viral illness, and young adults on a college campus are especially prone to these viral illnesses.

### **Why are viral illnesses and coughs more common in college students?**

- Students are often new to the area and to each other and thus are more susceptible to each other's viruses
- Students experience major changes in lifestyle, diet, sleep patterns, exercise and stress level, all of which greatly affect the body's ability to fight off illness.

### **What causes the cough?**

A cough is a normal physiologic mechanism. It is a protective reflex that is triggered whenever you get an irritation in your windpipe (trachea). It is activated during a respiratory illness, working to bring up phlegm.

### **Some people have more problems with cough than others.**

**Smokers** often experience cough as a regular part of a cold.

**People with asthma** often have a cough following exercise or exposure to allergens in the environment.

**People with allergies and allergic rhinitis** may have chronic or periodic post-nasal drip that triggers cough. People with “**sensitive lungs**” seem to develop a cough easily and hang on to it longer than most.

Occasionally, a cough may be a sign of a more serious illness. A simple viral illness can be followed by a bacterial infection of the lungs: pneumococcus, mycoplasma or tuberculosis all can cause problems. In these cases, the cough is a sign of a serious illness that requires specific medications in order to resolve.

### **How can I tell if my cough is serious?**

#### **Cough Associated with Viral Illness:**

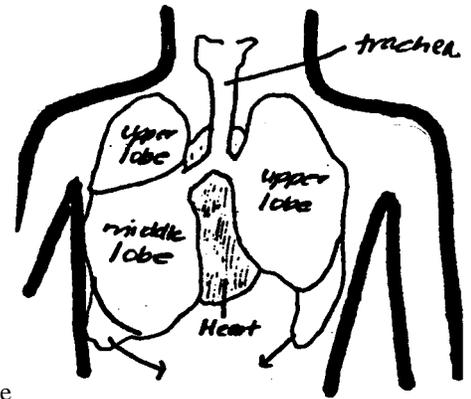
- often dry, persistent, hacking
- may be moist with phlegm production
- phlegm may be clear, white or yellowish
- associated with other cold symptoms, i.e. runny nose, congestion, sore throat, fatigue, muscle aches
- cold usually resolves within 7-10 days, but cough could persist for 2-4 weeks
- cough can usually be controlled with appropriate over-the-counter remedies

#### **Cough Associated with a Serious Illness:**

- may start out very much like the viral illness described above, but progresses
- becomes more frequent, interrupting sleep
- is associated with fever of >100 degrees F for at least 48 hours
- produces copious, thick, green or bloody phlegm
- wheezing or shortness of breath while climbing stairs may develop
- patient may notice chest pain with deep breathing that progresses to more constant pain
- patient may feel completely exhausted
- cough does not respond at all to appropriate medication
- generally, patient feels sicker each day
- ***If you experience any of these symptoms, call CHWS (x1555) or your health care provider to make an appointment.***

### **What can I do to help myself get better?**

"Self-care" can often make a major difference in how quickly you recover. As you can see from the picture of the lungs, they are located deep within the chest cavity right in front of the heart. An illness in this location can be very serious and needs to be taken seriously in terms of how you take care of yourself. Some general measures we highly recommend include:



THE LUNGS

### **Increase your intake of fluids**

Your lungs require a lot of liquids for normal functioning. When they are fighting an infection, this fluid requirement increases dramatically. You need **8-10 glasses of water and/or fruit juices** each day to help your body fight off the illness.

### **Increase your sleep**

Your lungs work hard to provide oxygen to your body. The only time they really get a break is when you are sleeping. Increasing your sleep two extra hours a day for several days will make a big difference.

### **Get a cool mist humidifier and use it**

These machines put extra moisture in the air, which then goes into your lungs. You may borrow a humidifier from Counseling, Health and Wellness Services.

### **Avoid strenuous exercise**

When you are exercising, your lungs' first priority is to provide enough oxygen to meet that need. Exercise puts a lot of stress on struggling lungs. During an acute illness with a significant cough, we recommend that you limit your exercise.

### **Discontinue smoking and don't allow people to smoke around you**

Cigarette smoke directly affects the ability of your lungs to respond to invading viruses and bacteria. Smoking paralyzes the hairs that line the lungs' airways, making it difficult to clear infected phlegm. Try to avoid it entirely during an episode of respiratory illness.

### **What kinds of remedies work best for cough?**

As you have probably noticed in your neighborhood drug store, there are many cough remedies. Most of these have unnecessary ingredients; one popular brand contains 25% alcohol - twice as strong as wine! Other added ingredients are costly and sometimes even harmful. For this reason, we recommend only three over-the-counter remedies:

**Home-brew:** Warm water with honey and lemon can soothe a cough.

**Cough Formula w/dextromethorphan:** This is a powerful cough suppressant. It can be taken every 12 hours, but we recommend you use it only at night so you can sleep.

**Cough Formula w/dextromethorphan & Guafenesin:** This formula combines a cough suppressant with an expectorant that helps to break up phlegm, making it easier to cough up and out.

Decongestants may be helpful if you're having problems with post-nasal drip. If your cough is worse at night when you lie down, post-nasal drip may be contributing to your cough.

### **It looks like I have a viral cough. What now?**

We recommend you give it time. There is no treatment for a virus; will simply go away when your body succeeds in fighting it off. How quickly your body does this will depend on how well you take care of yourself now.