

Patient information

Signs and symptoms of chest infections



Chest infection

If you have been diagnosed with a lung condition you can be at greater risk of contracting a chest infection.

Chest infections can be caused by a virus, bacteria or fungus and can occur anywhere from the nose to the lung tissue itself.

They are the commonest cause of a 'flare-up' or 'exacerbation' of your lung disease and are the most common acute problem treated in hospitals.

With every 'flare-up' or chest infection your lung function will deteriorate a little more.

With all this in mind it is important for you to spot the signs and symptoms of an infection and to know what to do and when.

Remember the earlier an infection is treated the more quickly you are likely to recover.



Signs and symptoms of an infection

- Change in colour of phlegm
- Change in quantity of phlegm
- Change in consistency of phlegm
- Increased breathlessness
- Increased wheeze
- A high temperature, or more hot sweats/flushes than normal
- Increased tiredness or sleeping more often
- Difficulty getting air in
- Increased use of reliever (blue) inhaler
- Decreased effectiveness of inhalers
- Loss of appetite
- Increased use of home oxygen
- Reduced exercise tolerance (tasks are more effortful)
- Cough - can be dry or productive
- Chest pain or tightness
- Rapid heartbeat
- Increased confusion or disorientation

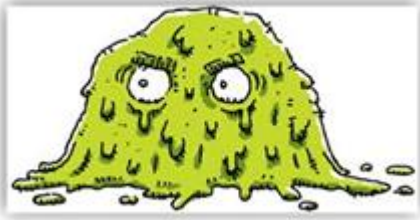
You may have one or more of these symptoms if you have an infection.



Phlegm (sputum)

If you are someone who regularly expectorates (cough up) phlegm it is a useful way to keep an eye on the health of your lungs.

The colour, quantity and consistency of your phlegm are important factors that can indicate whether there may be a problem.



Colour

- **White/Clear:** This is the normal colour of phlegm.
- **Brown:** If you have recently given up smoking or are still smoking then your phlegm may be brownish in colour.
- **Green:** Any shade of green, from the palest to the darkest, indicates that you have an active chest infection. This means that a visit to your GP would be advisable as antibiotics and/or steroids may be needed. Take a sputum specimen with you if you can.
- **Yellow:** Any shade of yellow, from the palest cream to the darkest, means an old infection. This is the more common colour to see as it can often take a while to start to clear the infected phlegm from your chest. Be aware that an old infection can become active again if it has not been fully cured.
- **Clear and frothy:** This can indicate that you may have some fluid in your lungs. This is especially important to keep an eye on if you are someone who suffers with swollen hands and feet or are on water tablets. Please visit your GP if you are concerned.

If you suspect that you have an infection and have a 'rescue pack' of antibiotics at home, then these can be started if you are unable to get an appointment with your GP immediately. If your symptoms do not continue to improve after 2-3 days of antibiotics then you may start your 'rescue pack' of steroids.

Please be sure to inform your GP or Respiratory Nurse that you have started this medication.

Quantity

Most people who expectorate phlegm frequently will know their usual 'amount' that they bring up daily and usually at what time of the day. Sometimes when an infection begins the quantity and frequency of the phlegm can increase.

Consistency

Often phlegm can get thicker, stickier and more difficult to clear if an infection is imminent.

Remember:

Drinking plenty of fluids will keep your phlegm thinner and easier to clear.

.....but beware:

Too much caffeine can be dehydrating and too much dairy in your diet can make your phlegm thicker, stickier and more difficult to clear.

Recurrent infections

Sometimes chest infections can be difficult to treat and will require more than one course of antibiotics or a change of antibiotics. Please be sure to return to your GP if:

- Your symptoms return after you have finished your full course of antibiotics
- You feel no better after taking the full course of antibiotics
- **You are someone who regularly coughs when they eat or drink**

Chest clearance techniques

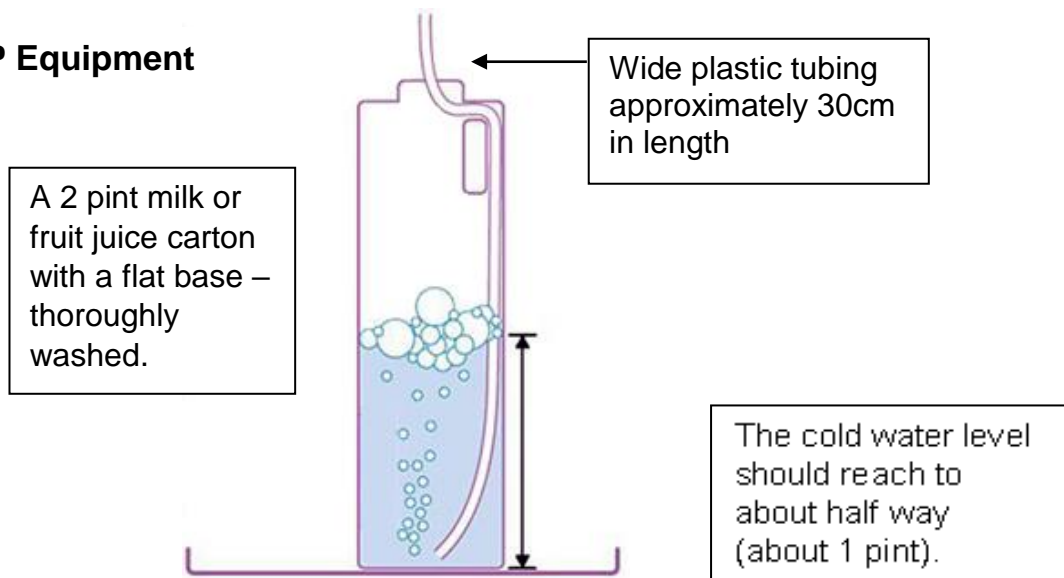
Bubble PEP

This is a very easy and effective technique to help you clear your chest. It will also help to strengthen your lungs!

PEP is short for Positive Expiratory Pressure. Bubble PEP is a technique used to help adults or children who have a build-up of phlegm (secretions) in their lungs and struggle to clear them. The technique involves blowing bubbles through water.

As you blow out and make bubbles in the water, a positive pressure is created within the tubing and transferred into the airways in your lungs. This positive pressure helps to hold open your airways, allowing more air to flow in and out. The air can then get behind the phlegm helping to move it more easily upwards through the open airways. You should then be able to cough or huff and clear the phlegm from your lungs.

Bubble PEP Equipment



- Take a **deep breath** in (without the tubing in your mouth).
- **Blow out** through the tubing (creating bubbles in the water) for as long as possible.
- Repeat this ___ times, making sure that you catch your breath between each blow out. This is one cycle.
- Then huff (forced expiratory technique) or cough to try and clear your phlegm – as instructed by your Physiotherapist.
- Always try to spit the phlegm out rather than swallow it.
- You can repeat the cycle as necessary or as instructed by your Physiotherapist

Please be sure to wash out the equipment after use

Active cycle of breathing technique (ACBT)

Trying to cough up phlegm can be tiring and unproductive. The Active Cycle of Breathing technique uses different depths of breathing to move phlegm from the smaller airways at the bottom of your lungs to the larger airways at the top of the lungs where you can then huff or cough to clear it.

This exercise should be performed in a relaxed position (sitting or side-lying) with your shoulders relaxed.



Steaming

This 'old fashioned' technique is very effective at helping to clear thick phlegm and your sinuses.

Fill a large bowl with hot water (you may add Eucalyptus Oil to the water if you wish). Sit with your face about 30cm above the steaming bowl and breathe in the vapours for about 5 minutes. This can be repeated 3-4 times per day if necessary.

Mucolytics

Sometimes clearing thick phlegm may require a more regular intervention. Please ask your GP or Respiratory Nurse about mucolytic medication that can be taken daily to help with this problem.

Clearing secretions

Coughing

Increased coughing during an infection can be painful, exhausting and inconvenient.

- Drink plenty to prevent your throat becoming dry and irritated
- Try to 'huff' rather than cough
- Support your chest when coughing

If you are having coughing 'fits' then try taking very small and frequent sips of water, **or** suck a boiled sweet, **or** take a simple linctus to try to relieve the irritation.

Huffing

This is a less tiring way to clear the phlegm from your lungs. Take a medium breath in, followed by a hard and fast exhalation through an open mouth (as if steaming up a mirror).

Other tips to help manage your chest during an infection

- Keep well hydrated (you should drink approximately 2 litres of fluid per day)
- Eat little and often to maintain the energy to fight the infection
- Rest frequently and keep tasks to a minimum to conserve energy
- Use your 'positions of ease' to help with breathlessness
- Raise the head of the bed when sleeping to make breathing easier
- **Always make sure you finish your full course of antibiotics**



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