

Patient information

Cough hypersensitivity

Over one in 10 people in the UK will suffer from chronic cough and up to 40% of these cases will not respond to medical management*. Intervention from a speech and language therapist has potential to reduce the severity and frequency of coughing episodes.

What is a cough/cough hypersensitivity?

When we cough, the vocal cords in our voice box clash together, creating a burst of air. A cough is meant to:

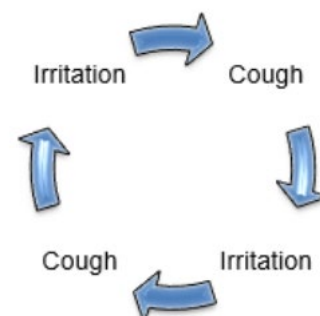
1. Stop harmful material entering the airway, e.g., smoke, mucus, food etc.
2. Eject mucus produced in the lungs, e.g., a chest infection.

Cough hypersensitivity is when a cough is triggered in response to a harmless trigger or irritation, e.g., cold air. This is sometimes called laryngeal hypersensitivity. Cough hypersensitivity is due to the abnormal function of the nerves in the airway (throat and lungs) and the parts of the brain that stop a cough.

Cough hypersensitivity can only be diagnosed after other medical professionals have investigated other conditions that may be contributing to your cough, e.g., asthma, COPD (chronic obstructive pulmonary disease), disordered breathing pattern, medications.

Consequences of constant coughing

Coughing itself can develop into a vicious cycle. Once you cough you may feel the need to take a deep breath; gasping in this cold air can trigger another cough, and the cycle continues.



The force of the vocal cords clashing together can also cause more irritation to the lining of the throat, making them more sensitive.

Some people with cough hypersensitivity say it is unpleasant and can be isolating. For some it can lead to poor sleep, disordered breathing, loss of bladder control, anxiety, isolation, and a hoarse voice.

Triggers

One of the first things to do to combat your cough is to identify what triggers it. With cough hypersensitivity, triggers are things that don't typically make people cough.

They might include:

- Cold air
- Exercise/exertion
- Chemicals
- Dry air
- Reflux
- Talking
- Laughing
- Dryness
- Dehydration
- Medication
- Stress/anxiety.

Some people can find it difficult to identify triggers, particularly if they overlap or are psychological.

There is no quick fix to stopping a persistent cough, but your speech and language therapist will work with you to ensure your throat is healthy and provide you with breathing techniques to manage your cough.

Reduce irritation

1. Ensure you are well hydrated:

- Drink 2 litres of water daily, unless advised otherwise by your doctor
- Carry a bottle of water at all times in order to take regular sips

- Avoid caffeinated/alcoholic drinks.

2. **Steam inhalation:**

- Inhale the steam from a cup of your favourite caffeine free hot drink/cup of boiling water
- Breathe shower steam when having a shower
- Run hot water into a sink or basin and inhale the steam
- Run a washcloth under hot water, wring it out, and hold it near your mouth and nose and breathe in
- Use a steam inhaler cup.

3. **Medication:**

- Some medications have a drying effect on the throat – use steam to combat this
- Rinse your mouth out and steam before and after using powdered inhalers
- Use a spacer with your inhalers if you can
- Ask your medical team if there are any alternative medications, that are less drying in the throat.

4. **Manage symptoms of reflux** (see additional leaflet)

Cough distraction

- **Remind yourself there is no functional benefit to the cough;** break the cycle!
- **Take a sip of water before the cough happens;** this keeps the throat moist
- **Hard/dry swallow several times;** this can help to swallow away any mucus
- **Sniff puff puff;** take a sharp sniff through your nose and blow out twice through pursed lips
- **Pursed lip breathing;** breathe in gently through your nose, then purse your lips, making them into a narrow 'O' shape and blow out, as if trying to whistle or blow out candles. Focus on trying to make the 'out' breath longer. This relaxes the throat muscles.

Practice cough control techniques regularly, even when you are not coughing. This will help you to retrain your throat muscles so you can use the strategies effectively when you feel the urge to cough or stop a coughing episode.

Follow this link to access a useful video resource that demonstrates cough suppression techniques:

[Breathing exercises: Northumbria Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust](#)

*Butler J, Parker S. Upper airway disorders: bridging the gap between primary and secondary care-part 1. J Gen Pract Nursing 2022;8(2):33-39

Adapted from Northumbria Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust Website

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