

## Coughs

A cough is a protective mechanism which clears the airways of irritants and obstructions. Voluntary coughs are deliberate action to clear the lungs and throat. Involuntary coughs are caused by mechanical, chemical or nervous stimulation, such as chest infections, somoke, foreign bodies, dust and mucus.

Productive coughs are often described as "loose" or "chesty" and they bring up phlegm or mucus. Cough mixtures containing directly acting expectorants, such as ammonium chloride, ipecacuanha and guaiphenesin, facilitate coughing. Steam inhalation is effective in liquifying mucus. Cough suppressants should not be recommended to patients with a chesty cough.

Green-yellow or rusty coloured phlegm is symptomatic of a lung infection and the patient should be referred. The same applies to patients coughing up blood.

Non-productive coughs are the dry, barking cough and nocturnal tickle which keep the patient awake at night. Non-productive coughs which have been present for any length of time, require further investigation. Dry coughs only require treatment if they are preventing sleep or causing the patient distress or inconvenience. If sips of water, warm drinks or bland linctuses do not resolve the problem cough suppressants such as codeine, pholcodine and dextromethorphan can be used. Codeine can cause constipation and is commonly abused. Many cough preparations contain additional ingredients such as antihistamines or decongestants – see the colds and flu section for further information. Patients with a long-standing cough shortness of breath, severe pain on breathing in or weight loss, require further investigation and probably referral.