

## Physiotherapy

# Cough Suppression: A Patient's Guide

## Introduction

Coughing is an important reflex to clear the throat and to stop foreign bodies entering the airways. However, if coughing continues for a long period of time (chronic cough), it can lead to negative side effects, such as, throat irritation, hoarse or altered voice, changes to your breathing pattern, being sick (vomiting), tiredness, poor sleep, incontinence, low mood and social embarrassment.

Chronic cough is often caused by increased sensitivity of the cough reflex and irritation of the vocal cords.

It is important to recognise the difference between when you should cough and when it is counter-productive to cough. This leaflet aims to help you to see the difference, and provide some strategies for an unnecessary cough (cough suppression).

## Deciding Whether to Cough

When you feel a cough coming, ask yourself if it is wet or dry.

If you can feel sputum, and your cough sounds wet (productive), it is important to cough and clear it. This should be an effective strong cough from your stomach. You should avoid long bouts of coughing as this can



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be tiring and may make you feel breathless, or make your throat or chest sore or tight. If sputum is a problem for you, your Physiotherapist will show you separate airway clearance techniques and advise when to do them.

However, if your cough is persistent and dry (non-productive), it is important to try not to cough and instead use strategies to suppress it (cough suppression). When you cough, your vocal cords are struck together forcefully. If you have an unnecessary cough, the vocal cords will just become irritated and this can cause more coughing in response, which worsens over time.

## Cough Triggers

It is important to identify and avoid triggers to your cough reflex;

- **Pollution, chemicals, cold air, dust, mould, perfumes, aerosols;** avoid inhaled irritants where possible, otherwise use a scarf or dust mask to cover your nose/ mouth
- **Smoke;** don't smoke (visit GP, pharmacist or search NHS stop smoking services online). Avoid second hand smoke
- **Animal dander;** avoid if you have a known allergy to certain animals
- **Pollen;** avoid if you have a known allergy and consider allergy medication from pharmacy or GP
- **Exercise;** start rhythmic breathing through your nose as you exercise
- **Caffeine and alcohol;** avoid too much tea and coffee (limit intake to about 2-3 cups per day) as caffeine and alcohol dry the throat

## Cough Suppression and Control Strategies

When you feel a cough coming, try to suppress or control the cough with distraction and/ or hydration;

- **Tell yourself you do not need to cough; break the cycle!**
- **Sipping water regularly;** this keeps the throat moist, whereas caffeine and alcohol dry the throat. Drink 2 litres of water each day,

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unless advised otherwise by your Doctor. Additionally keeping hydrated reduces coughing by protecting the vocal cords

- **Sucking boiled sweets, lollies, ice cubes or chewing gum;** this increases swallowing frequency and has a soothing effect. Avoid medicated lozenges as they dry the throat
- **Hard/ dry swallow several times**
- **Hot honey and lemon drink;** this has antioxidant/ cough suppressant properties
- **Ginger tea;** this has antioxidant/ throat anti-inflammatory properties
- **Humidifier/ steam inhalation;** breathing in more moisture hydrates irritated airways/ throat
- **Sleep propped up with extra pillows or pillows in a ‘V-shape’;** this can reduce coughing and breathing difficulties while sleeping
- **If you have to cough, do so as softly as possible;** to reduce high impact (loud) coughing as soon as it starts and prevent throat tenderness

## Breathing Strategies for Cough Control

A number of breathing techniques can suppress the cough by relaxing the throat, neck, shoulders and upper chest and focusing on your breathing and vocal cords;

- **Throat massage and/ or neck/ shoulder stretches if muscle tension from coughing**
- **Breathing control;** see separate handout. This relaxes the throat muscles
- **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
- **Nasal breathing;** breathe in and out through your nose. Breathing in through your nose warms and moisturises air, reducing the irritating effect of dry cold air on the throat

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- **Nasal breathing with sniffs;** breathe in through your nose in 3-4 short, sharp, quick sniffs, then blow out gently through pursed lips. This channels air and ‘cushions’ the vocal cords to help reduce irritation

It is important to recognise there is no ‘quick fix’. You will need to practice the techniques that work best for you regularly when you are not coughing, little and often, so you are ready to use them when you feel a cough coming on. In time you will learn to control the cough before it starts.

If you have any concerns or queries regarding your exercise then please ask a member of staff for advice. **You can contact the Therapy Department on 024 7696 6013.**

The Trust has access to interpreting and translation services. If you need this Information in another language or format please contact the Therapy Department on 024 7696 6013 and we will do our best to meet your needs.

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