

# Cough (acute): antimicrobial prescribing

Information for the public

Published: 7 February 2019

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## Do I need antibiotics for a cough?

A cough is usually caused by a virus like a cold or flu. It can also be a symptom of bronchitis, in which the airways of the lungs become irritated and inflamed. Bronchitis is usually caused by a virus or, more rarely, a bacterial infection.

Using antibiotics when they are not needed means they may not work as well in the future. This is a serious health risk so NICE has written advice about when to offer antibiotics for some common conditions, including cough.

Most people with a cough won't be offered antibiotics because:

- A cough normally gets better within 3 to 4 weeks whether you take antibiotics or not.
- Antibiotics make little or no difference to symptoms.
- Antibiotics can cause side effects, like diarrhoea and nausea (feeling sick).

You will be prescribed antibiotics if you need them, such as if you are very unwell or are at risk of complications. In some cases you may be offered a 'back-up' antibiotic prescription. This is a prescription you can use to get an antibiotic if you suddenly start to feel more unwell or your cough becomes much worse. If you're offered antibiotics your doctor should explain that they can cause side effects.

If you don't need antibiotics your doctor should explain why. Your doctor or pharmacist can tell you about other ways to help your cough. You may want to try one of the following, although there is only a little research showing they are helpful:

- honey (not for babies under 1 year)
- a herbal medicine called pelargonium (not for under-12s).

Some types of cough medicine that you can get without a prescription might also be helpful for over 12s – your doctor or pharmacist can give you advice on which ones to try.

Very occasionally, coughs have other more serious causes and your doctor may decide that you need some tests or to see a specialist.

You should see your doctor if your cough doesn't get better after 3 or 4 weeks, gets worse suddenly or you feel very unwell. You may be referred to hospital if you have signs of a serious illness such as sepsis.

## Where can I find out more?

Decisions about treatment and care are best when they are made together. Your health professionals should give you clear information, talk with you about your options and listen carefully to your views and concerns.

The NHS website has more information about:

- [cough](#)
- [antibiotics](#) and
- [sepsis](#).

We have also written information on [why antibiotics should be used wisely](#).

We wrote this guideline with health professionals and members of the public. All the recommendations are based on the best research available.

ISBN: 978-1-4731-3264-1