



Managing the allergic cough

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Introduction

Occasional coughing is normal as it assists in clearing secretions and irritants from the lungs and it may help to prevent infection. However, a cough that persists for weeks is usually the result of a medical condition. A chronic dry cough (a cough that has lasted for more than three weeks) may be a symptom of allergies. Frequent coughing is more than just an annoyance. It can be embarrassing, interrupt sleep and cause a person to become physically tired and exhausted. Severe cases of chronic cough may cause dizziness, hoarseness, muscle strains, vomiting and even rib fractures.

Cause and triggers

An allergy-related cough is caused by the immune system's response to the presence of an environmental allergen (e.g. pollen, dust mite, animal hair, mould, cockroaches), rather than by an infection such as the flu or a cold. An allergic reaction means the immune system treats a harmless substance as if it is dangerous and launches an 'attack'. The nasal passages become inflamed and more mucus is produced. If the cough is allergy-related, it may occur during certain seasons or in some environments.

Symptoms

Postnasal drip may develop in people with allergies. It occurs when secretions from the nose drip or flow into the back of the throat from the nose. These secretions may irritate the throat and trigger the cough reflex. Other allergy symptoms may also be present, including congestion (a stuffy nose), sneezing, itchy skin, eyes and nose.

Management

Avoiding allergens or irritants that the body is sensitive to and taking appropriate treatments are the best ways to reduce the

frequency of symptoms effectively. A cough related to postnasal drip may improve with the use of a decongestant, antihistamine or intranasal corticosteroid. The best treatment (or combination of treatments) depends upon symptoms and medical history.

Oral and nasal decongestants

These preparations may unblock and relieve a stuffy and runny nose. Nasal sprays should only be used for limited periods (not longer than a few days) as they may cause 'rebound congestion'. Examples include oxymetazoline and xylometazoline. Oral decongestants (e.g. pseudoephedrine and phenylephrine) should be limited to short-term symptomatic relief. They may have stimulant side effects such as increased blood pressure, tremors or cause difficulty sleeping. These medicines are only available in combination with analgesics or antihistamines for over-the-counter (OTC) use.

Antihistamines

Antihistamines are of value in the treatment of allergic conditions. They block the action of histamine, which the body releases in response to exposure to an allergen, relieving symptoms such as swollen nasal passages, a stuffy and runny nose. Antihistamines such as cetirizine, fexofenadine or loratadine may also be effective for allergic postnasal drip and are available without a prescription. They are less likely to cause drowsiness than older generation antihistamines such as chlorpheniramine. Nasal antihistamine sprays such as azelastine may also relieve postnasal drip.

Intranasal corticosteroids

Some intranasal corticosteroid sprays are available OTC and may be used to ease inflammation and irritation along the nasal passageway, postnasal drip and cough. These nasal sprays are usually used for people with moderate to severe symptoms. It is advised that they be used regularly, in recommended doses and with the correct administration technique.

Saline nose drops/sprays

Saline nose drops/sprays may help wash out the allergens and extra mucus. These non-medicated approaches may often provide relief from symptoms.

Lifestyle and home remedies

The following remedies may assist in relieving the cough:

- **Suck on hard candies or cough drops.** They may soothe an irritated throat and ease a dry cough.
- **Moisturise the air.** Use a cool-mist humidifier or take a steamy shower. The warmth may help open up the nasal passages while the moist steam keeps them from drying out.
- **Drink fluids.** Fluids may help thin the mucus in the throat. Warm liquids, such as tea, broth or juice, may have a soothing effect on the throat.
- **Stay indoors** on days when pollen counts are high.
- **Change clothes and wash hair and body after being outdoors.** This may also help to reduce allergen exposure.
- **Honey** may help loosen a cough. It is not recommended to give honey to children younger than 1 year of age, because honey may contain bacteria that are harmful to infants.
- **Avoid tobacco smoke.** Smoking or breathing in second-hand smoke irritates the lungs and may worsen coughs caused by other factors.

Conclusion

An allergic cough is rarely a serious condition, although its symptoms may be uncomfortable and inconvenient, especially if the patient does not seek medical assistance. It is recommended to seek medical advice even if allergy symptoms are mild. If the symptoms are not managed properly, there is a risk of developing complications.

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