

Chronic cough and throat clearing: guide for patients

Throat problems produce a number of symptoms such as cough, throat clearing, irritation in the throat and mucus. This leaflet helps to explain the normal function of the throat and how some of these symptoms may be produced and treated.

Why is the throat so sensitive?

Given that we eat drink and breath through the same hole - the mouth, it is remarkable that we manage to direct all the food and drink into the gullet (oesophagus) and air into the windpipe (trachea). If we were not designed in this way we would soon drown in our own saliva or food would block our airways. Our ability to do this is largely due to the fact that our airways are guarded by extremely sensitive tissues, which can detect solids and liquids and will divert them towards the gullet or expel them from the airway by coughing. This protective reflex is very important and sensitive but in some circumstances it can be the source of throat problems due to over stimulation of the lining of the throat and “up-regulation” of this reflex.

Some of the common factors which cause throat problems, along with treatment suggestion are described below.

Reflux: This is due to acidic stomach contents passing upwards to the throat. Not surprisingly, this causes an irritation in the throat as a result of a low level chemical burn. Dietary alterations, postural care and medications are the best treatments for this condition. Your doctor will give you more advice about this if necessary.

Mouth breathing and blocked nose: The nose is the air-conditioning unit for the lower airways. It warms and moistens the air we breathe very effectively. If the nose is blocked and mouth breathing takes over, this effect is lost and the throat and airways soon become dry and sensitive. Your doctor will examine your nose to check that your airway is sufficient and advise you on treatments if necessary.

Rhinitis: This is the medical word for nasal allergy. This can occur in the spring or summer in which case we call it hay fever; however, we can develop allergies to many inhaled particles which can cause similar effects all year round. Rhinitis can lead to throat problems either due to a partial blocking of the nose (see above), or due to post nasal drip.

This is the production of excessive nasal mucus which can drip into the throat causing irritation and excessive swallowing.

Asthma and lung disease: Many patients with rhinitis also have asthma and vice versa. Asthma is a breathing condition which is due to the sensitivity of the lower airways, which can constrict causing an attack. It is not surprising that people with a sensitivity of the upper airway (rhinitis) and / or a sensitivity of the lower airway (asthma) often have a sensitivity of the area in between, i.e. the throat and voice box. Other lung conditions, such as bronchitis, can lead to an excessive production of mucus in the lungs which needs to be cleared by coughing.

Poor air quality: Industrial fumes and car pollution will cause irritation of the lining of the throat as will dust. Also, in modern buildings with central heating and cars, we are often exposed to dry poor quality air. This can have adverse effects on the throat. Where possible, try to avoid such situations, use protection where appropriate and consider the use of a humidifier or ionizer.

Smoking: Smoking has serious effects on the lining of the throat. In addition to causing irritation because of the substances contained in the smoke, it causes further drying and promotes mouth breathing. It is the main cause of throat cancer.

Anxiety and stress: Stress causes an overall increase in muscle tension and these effects are often noticed in the throat, either as a mild change in the quality of the voice or as a sensation of a tightness or lump in the throat which then leads to constant throat clearing. Stress also increases acid production in the stomach, which may make the effects of reflux worse.

Drying: As described above, the throat becomes over sensitive when dry and this can promote throat problems. It is important to ensure that you drink enough water (not just coffee and tea, which can actually have a drying effect). As a rough rule you should aim to drink about 1 litre of water a day in addition to any other drinks you may have.

Voice strain: Many people with throat problems do not use their voices correctly and have a degree of voice strain. This is particularly important if you spend a long time on the phone, are involved in presentations or public speaking or enjoy singing. Any resulting tension in the muscles of the throat can make your symptoms worse. In some cases your doctor may recommend speech therapy which is essentially physiotherapy for the voice.

Coughing and throat clearing: The very act of coughing or clearing the throat can actually cause throat problems to become worse or longer lasting. This occurs as a result of the

violent bringing together of the vocal cords which in itself can cause inflammation in the throat. This can quickly lead to a self-perpetuating condition. Where possible, try to control the desire to cough or clear the throat. This can be difficult but swallowing or taking a sip of water will help to take away the sensation. It will also help to moisten the throat and prevent drying.

Infections: Viral infections such as coughs and colds are common but they can sometimes lead to longer-lasting throat problems. This occurs as a result of excessive coughing and swallowing of mucus, in addition to inflammation of the tissues of the throat. These effects can continue long after the cold itself has gone. Trying to avoid infections is not easy but if you do get a cold, rest and do not try to speak too much and avoid singing or shouting, since this can lead to long-term voice strain. Take plenty of fluids and simple painkillers such as paracetamol.

Drugs: Some drugs can cause a cough or throat problem. ACE inhibitors, which are drugs used to treat high blood pressure, heart or circulatory problems, often cause a side effect of a dry cough. Some painkillers and aspirin-like drugs (NSAIDs) can increase stomach acid and make reflux problems worse.

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