

Heathgate Medical Practice Self-care leaflet – Cough

This range of leaflets created by our clinical team provide useful information on a range of conditions that can in most cases be managed by patients at home. Where symptoms persist after a period of self-care or after advice from the local pharmacist, you should consider calling the surgery.

A cough is a sudden and often repetitive protective reflex, which helps to clear the larger breathing passages from fluid, irritants, foreign particles and infection. We all cough from time to time for example to clear our throats.

Most coughs are due to common colds or flu and will resolve within three weeks.

There are other causes of coughs. These include smoking, chest infections, allergies, long term chest complaints such as asthma or COPD, acid reflux and mucus dripping down the back of the nose and throat. These causes often lead to longer periods of coughing and other associated symptoms.

Very rarely a cough can be a sign of something more serious like lung cancer.

What are the symptoms associated with a cough?

A cough caused by a common cold or flu may be associated with other symptoms such as a sore throat, tiredness, runny or blocked nose, a mild temperature and muscle aches.

What can I do to help myself?

Taking adequate rest, staying warm and making sure you are hydrated will help a cough associated with a common cold or the flu.

Remedies available from shops (honey and lemon) or a local pharmacist may make you feel better but there is no research to suggest that they will shorten the duration of your cough. Coughs caused by the common cold or the flu will not be improved by antibiotics.

When should I contact a healthcare professional?

You should contact a doctor or a nurse:

- If you have had a cough for more than 3 weeks.
- If your cough is very bad or gets worse very quickly – i.e. you start hacking or you can't stop coughing.
- If you have chest pain as well as a cough.
- If you are losing weight for no reason.
- If the side of your neck feels swollen and painful (including swollen glands).
- If you find it hard to breathe.
- If you have a weakened immune system for example because of chemotherapy treatment.

Further advice on coughs is available at www.nhs.uk