

HEALTH MAIN

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CONDITIONS

Living with Allergies

Mystery cough? 8 possible culprits

STORY HIGHLIGHTS

- Inhaling pollen, dust, pet dander can trigger allergies
- Short-term fume exposure can result in cough
- How to tell acute bronchitis from a more serious condition
- Only a doctor can tell for sure what's behind a chronic cough

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By Ray Hainer

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Health

([Health.com](#)) -- You've been coughing for weeks. How do you know if it's just a hard-to-shake cold or something more serious?



Coughing is one of the five most common reasons for a doctor's visit.

A chronic cough, defined as lasting more than eight weeks, is not uncommon.

Up to 40 percent of nonsmokers in the United States and Europe have reported a chronic cough at some point, and coughing is one of the five most common reasons for a doctor's visit.

Only a doctor can tell for sure what's behind your endless hacking.

However, in a 2006 study of women with an average age of 48 who had a cough lasting for six months, 39 percent were found to have asthma, 9 percent had chronic upper airway cough syndrome (commonly known as postnasal drip), and 9 percent had gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD).

In addition, another 11 percent had chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), a serious,

progressive disease that includes both emphysema and bronchitis. While not all people who develop COPD are smokers, people who smoke are at higher risk. Overall, 24 million Americans -- about 1 in 12 people -- have COPD, although half don't know they have the disease.

1. Asthma and allergies

Asthma is a chronic lung disease in which the airways in the lungs are prone to inflammation and swelling. Along with chest tightness, shortness of breath, and wheezing, coughing is a characteristic symptom of asthma, one which tends to intensify at night or in the early morning. When the symptoms of asthma flare up suddenly, it's known as an asthma attack.

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Although it can begin at any age, asthma usually develops in childhood. Asthma triggers are different for everyone, and they can include

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