

I'VE GOT A TROUBLESOME COUGH: WILL AN ANTIBIOTIC MAKE ME BETTER?

Some information to help you in the next week or so

We don't always know when antibiotics help a chesty cough.

For people who are normally fit and well, we do know that:

- most chesty illnesses get better on their own
- antibiotics don't help most coughs get better quicker
- antibiotics can have unpleasant side effects (for example thrush, rashes, tummy upsets and diarrhoea)
- taking antibiotics when you don't need them isn't sensible
- overusing antibiotics produces resistant germs, which means the medicines may not work when they are really needed.

So deciding when to use antibiotics isn't always easy!

Your doctor has examined you during your visit to the surgery and even though you feel unwell, he or she hasn't found any serious illness that definitely needs antibiotics today.

What does a "chesty cough" mean?

A cough is not a "bad" thing: it is there for a reason. It helps defend your lungs by making sure that any secretions your airways produce are coughed UP, rather than settling in the lower lungs where they would cause trouble. "Phlegm" or "sputum" is there to act as a barrier to catch the dust and germs that we breathe in.

Your cough is part of your body's defence mechanisms, and is likely to be the last symptom of your current illness to go back to normal.

The process of recovery, even with any prescribed treatment, is likely to take up to two or three weeks to complete. Assuming you are not getting worse, you need not worry if your cough and phlegm take this time to settle, especially if you are getting gradually better each day.

So, your chesty cough will quite likely get better without antibiotics. However, your doctor may have given you a prescription to have available in case you do need antibiotics in the next few days. Use your judgement whether to get them; the prescription should only be used for this episode of illness.

When should I return to my doctor?

If **you** feel your illness is getting worse.

If **you** feel your cough is getting worse.

If **you** do use antibiotics, do take the **FULL course**.

Is there anything I should look out for?

Should you find that you develop any new or worrying symptoms or if you start to cough up blood, telephone the surgery and make an appointment for a further check-up.

Four ways to help your chesty cough

1. Make sure you're drinking plenty of fluids so you don't get dehydrated.
2. Take paracetamol if you have fever or aches and pains. Check the package for dosing instructions.
3. Some people find sucking a lozenge or hard lolly is soothing.
4. Steam inhalations can help clear mucus and ease chest tightness. For adults: breathe in steam during a hot shower or place your head over a sink of hot (not boiling) water, using a towel to trap the steam. Do not use for young children: steam can cause burns.

Practice stamp

Adapted from: Macfarlane J, Holmes W, Gard P, et al. BMJ 2002;324:91.

April 2002

This leaflet may be printed for patient use.



National Prescribing Service Limited

NPS is an independent, Australian organisation for Quality Use of Medicines,
funded by the Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing.