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Managing a Persistent Cough: From Acute to Chronic

A cough is your body's way of clearing irritants from your airways, but when it lingers, it shifts from a helpful reflex to an exhausting burden. Whether your cough is acute (lasting under 3 weeks, usually viral) or chronic (lasting 8 weeks or more), management focuses on soothing the throat and addressing the underlying cause.

Immediate Relief: Home Care Strategies

For most coughs, the goal is to reduce irritation and thin mucus so it can be cleared more easily.

- **Hydrate to Thin Mucus:** Drinking plenty of water is the most effective way to thin secretions in the lungs and throat. Warm liquids—like herbal tea or broth—are particularly soothing.
- **The Honey Method:** A spoonful of honey (for adults and children over age 1) can be as effective as some over-the-counter suppressants. It coats the throat, reducing the “tickle” that triggers a cough.
- **Optimize Air Quality:** Dry air is a major cough trigger. Use a cool-mist humidifier or take a steamy shower to add moisture to your airways.
- **Elevate Your Head:** If your cough worsens at night, use extra pillows to prop yourself up. This prevents mucus from pooling in the back of your throat (post-nasal drip).

Identifying the Cause

Management strategies change depending on why you are coughing:

Type of Cough	Common Causes	Best Management Approach
Acute (Wet)	Common cold, flu, bronchitis	Expectorants (to thin mucus) and hydration.
Acute (Dry)	Allergies, dry air, irritants	Suppressants (to stop the reflex) and honey.
Chronic	Asthma, GERD (Acid Reflux), Smoking	Treat the root cause (e.g., antacids for reflux).
Unexplained	Could be a side effect to medications	Discuss with your health care provider.

Cough suppressants over the counter include Robitussin and Delsym. Any medication with a DM at the end of the name is designed to suppress a cough. DM stands for Dextromethorphan.

If these medications don't work, prescription cough suppressants may be needed. Talk to your health care provider to explore these options.

When to See Your Healthcare Provider: A persistent cough can sometimes be a “red flag” for more serious conditions like pneumonia, heart failure, or lung disease.

Seek medical advice if you experience:

1. **Hemoptysis:** Coughing up blood or rust-colored mucus.
2. **Shortness of Breath:** Difficulty catching your breath even while resting. Also known as air hunger.
3. **Wheezing:** A whistling sound when you breathe.
4. **Duration:** Any cough that lasts longer than 8 weeks requires a professional evaluation to rule out chronic issues.

Practical Tip: The “Cough Drop” Alternative

While medicated lozenges work, any hard candy can help by increasing saliva production, which naturally lubricates the throat and reduces the urge to cough.

Note: Avoid using over the counter multi-symptom cold medicines unless your symptoms match ALL of the active ingredients. Often, a single-ingredient suppressant or expectorant is more effective.

The above information was reviewed and validated by David Campbell-O’Dell, DNP, APRN-IP, FNP-BC, FAANP