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Controlling your cough

Physiotherapy Department
Information for Patients

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Introduction

This leaflet aims to give information about:

- what happens when you cough.
- why cough control is important.
- what is a ‘good’ breathing pattern and why is it important to help cough control.
- practical suggestions to break the cycle of a chronic cough.

Why do we cough?

Coughing is often a reflex action. It is your body's way of automatically stopping choking and clearing dust and other irritants out of your windpipe and lungs.

Coughing can be a problem when it happens with no obvious cause (for example, phlegm or irritants).

This can become a vicious cycle where too much coughing causes irritation and inflammation which makes the cough worse. This type of cough is sometimes called a chronic cough.

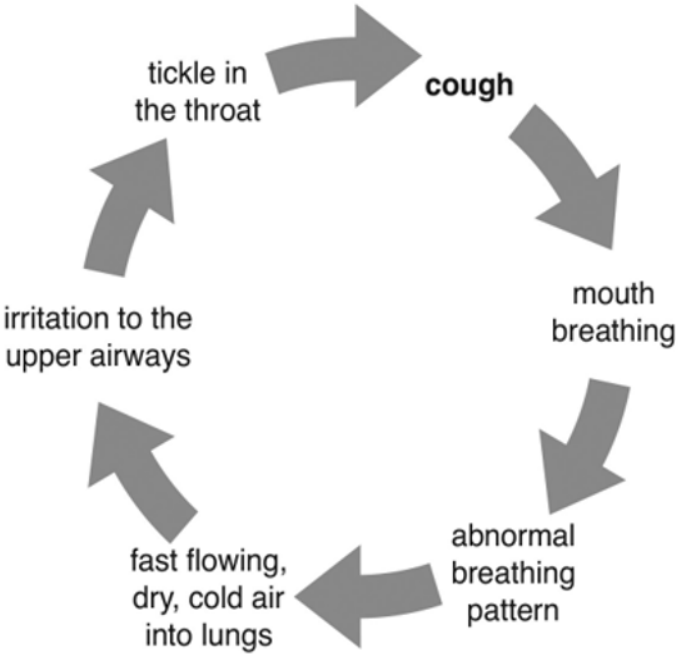
Sometimes this type of cough can be voluntary where you cough on purpose because of a tickle in your throat. It can become a habit. A chronic cough can be difficult to control.

Why can a cough be difficult to control?

A cough can be difficult to control if:

- you have inflammation in your upper airway from too much coughing.
- you have a chest infection.
- you have a lot of phlegm.
- your airways are tight and wheezy.
- you mainly breathe through your mouth with an abnormal breathing pattern.

Chronic cough cycle



Why is mouth breathing a problem?

Too much dry, fast flowing, cold air enters the lungs which can cause a cough and lead to a cycle of coughing (see diagram above). Mouth breathing during heavy exercise is normal.

What is a ‘normal’ breathing pattern?

- Nose breathing (in and out).
- Gentle, silent diaphragmatic (tummy) breathing with very little upper chest movement.
- Breathing out is quiet and with no effort.
- The rate is rhythmical with an average 10 to 15 breaths per minute at rest.
- Depth of breathing should be different during activity and rest.

Learning this breathing pattern is essential in helping you control your cough. Spend time practising a good breathing pattern when you are resting and during light activity. Ask your respiratory physiotherapist for help if you are struggling.

How will this help me control my cough?

This will help you to break the cycle detailed above.

How can I control my cough?

Learning techniques to stop coughing as well as using a good breathing pattern are vital in cough control. Some ideas you may like to try if you feel a cough coming on:

- Close your mouth and swallow.
- Drop or relax your shoulders and gently breathe in and out through your nose until the urge to cough goes away.

- Try sipping drinks regularly during the day. Try hot and cold drinks initially to see which works better for you.
- Try sucking lozenges or boiled sweets.
- Try just clearing your throat to relieve a tickle.

Using a combination of these techniques is better at reducing coughing than using just 1 or 2. Cough control can be very hard but keep practising and it will become easier.

Summary

Be kind to your airways:

- Practice the techniques detailed in this leaflet regularly.
- Controlling your cough can be very difficult but will improve with practice.
- Ask your respiratory physiotherapist for help if needed.

Breathe through your nose:

- At rest and during light activity.
- **Follow the good breathing pattern advice detailed in this leaflet.**

Keep practising:

- The techniques often take a while for you to notice any benefits.
- At first you should notice that your coughing bouts are shorter or the cough is not as hard, then they should happen less often.
- The end goal is for you to regain control of your cough and your breathing pattern, to allow you to complete all your normal day-to-day activities.

Contact details:

Adult Physiotherapy Department is based at Glenfield Hospital: 0116 258 3595 (Monday to Friday, 8.30am to 4.30pm).

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Visit www.uhleicester.nhs.uk for maps and information about visiting Leicester's Hospitals.
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