

# Let's Cough About It: A Guide to Understanding and Managing Your Child's Cough

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## Introduction

The chilly days of winter are coming to a close, and the spring flowers are opening up in bloom. As the seasons change, it can be difficult to tell if your child's cough is due to a lingering winter cold, the onset of allergy season, or some other underlying issue. Children cough for many reasons. By understanding the different types of coughs and their associated symptoms, you can feel empowered to determine the cause and when to contact the doctor. Let's look at common coughs in children, tips for alleviating discomfort, and red flags to watch out for.

# Productive vs. Nonproductive

Coughs can be categorized as either [dry or wet](#). A dry cough indicates irritation to the upper airways. A dry cough, characterized by a hacking sound and lack of mucus production, is often associated with allergies and asthma. On the other hand, a wet cough, typically due to a viral infection, indicates irritation to the lower airways, leading to mucus production.

## Viral/Infectious

In young children, a cough is most often a symptom of a viral infection. Children are particularly susceptible to common viruses like RSV and the flu. A healthy child may experience up to 10 viral infections a year. Viruses typically present with a wet cough as the body fights the infection and produces mucus. The mucus can vary in color from clear to yellow-green. A viral cough may linger and become dry as the infection resolves. Viral coughs can present with other symptoms like a runny nose, sore throat, or low-grade fever. Management of a viral cough typically happens at home with rest, humidification, and plenty of fluids.

### Whooping Cough (Pertussis)

Caused by the pertussis virus, [whooping cough](#) produces a distinctive “whoop” or “hoop” sound on inhalation following an intense bout of coughing. Pertussis is a serious infection. Fortunately, the DTaP vaccine protects against the virus. It is crucial to speak with your doctor to ensure your child and the adults in your household are vaccinated. If you suspect your child is infected, contact your pediatrician right away.

### Croup Cough

Another viral illness, [croup](#), triggers inflammation in the child’s upper airways, producing a dry, hoarse-sounding cough resembling a seal’s bark. Symptoms typically improve outdoors in the cool air but worsen when lying down at night. In severe cases, a high-pitched squeaking sound, or stridor, may be heard when the child inhales. If your child is experiencing stridor, contact your pediatrician immediately.

## Allergic Cough

An allergic cough arises from allergen irritation to the back of the throat, often presenting as a dry cough. However, allergens can also cause a wet cough due to post-nasal drip. In this case, mucus is typically clear in color. Allergic symptoms may

include congestion, sneezing, and itchy, watery eyes. Management with rest, fluids, and humidification can ease discomfort. If symptoms persist, your pediatrician may recommend medication.

## Cough with Wheezing

Asthma, characterized by airway inflammation, results in coughing and wheezing, a whistling noise, most often heard when your child breathes out. Various triggers, including viruses, allergens, and environmental factors, can trigger asthmatic symptoms. Wheezing requires immediate medical attention. Management of asthma includes avoidance of triggers and appropriate medication use.

## Inhalation of an Irritant or Foreign Object

When a child exhibits a cough with no other symptoms, inhalation of a foreign object may be suspected. The object can sit in the airway, causing irritation and inflammation. Such a cough will persist until the object is removed and requires evaluation by a doctor.

Inhalation of an irritant can also trigger coughing. Gastrointestinal reflux, a condition allowing acid to move from the stomach to the lungs, may manifest with a hoarse-sounding cough. Smoke exposure from cigarettes, vaping, and wood burning can also irritate the airways, resulting in coughing.

## Acute vs. Persistent

The duration of your child's cough offers valuable insight into its potential cause. For instance, a cough from a viral infection typically lasts around ten days. A cough lasting less than two weeks is classified as [acute](#), while one lasting beyond two weeks is considered persistent and warrants evaluation to determine the underlying cause.

## Conclusion

A cough can be a symptom of a viral infection, an allergic reaction, or some other underlying issue. Often, it is difficult to determine the cause. While you can manage most coughs at home, it is important to seek medical attention if your child experiences difficulty breathing or if the cough lasts longer than two weeks.