

What is a chronic persistent wet cough?

FACT SHEET prepared by The Asthma and Respiratory Foundation NZ

A chronic persistent wet cough is a mucousy, phlegmy sounding cough that lasts more than four weeks and is present most days. It sounds as if your child has mucus in their chest and is often described as a “chesty cough”.

Does your child cough?

Coughing is common in children, especially when they are preschool age and is usually short-lived. Ten to twenty percent of pre-schoolers will cough for three weeks or more following a cold. Even children without a cold may cough on average up to ten times a day BUT not consistently EVERY DAY.

A daily cough for more than four weeks is not normal and may be a sign of chest disease.

What should I do if my child has a chronic persistent wet cough?

You should see your doctor if your child's persistent, daily, chesty sounding cough lasts for longer than four weeks. It is a serious warning sign that there may be underlying chest problems and should not be ignored hoping that it will go away. If chest infections in children are treated promptly permanent lung scarring and the development of diseases such as bronchiectasis may be prevented. For further information on bronchiectasis see the Asthma Foundation fact sheet “What is Bronchiectasis?” or visit our website asthmaandrespiratory.org.nz

A wet chesty cough is likely to be caused by infection. Don't just assume that a wet cough is a “post nasal drip” or mucus running down the back of the throat from a sinus infection.

Children under five years do not spit up phlegm and may swallow it. Small children and babies may also vomit it up.

Remember Chronic Persistent Wet Cough:

- Is serious
- Is not normal and its presence should be investigated to try and find out what is causing it
- If treated appropriately permanent lung scarring and the development of permanent lung damage and diseases such as bronchiectasis can be prevented

Other causes of cough:

- Colds or upper respiratory tract infections
- Asthma – an asthma related cough is usually dry and occurs at night, with sport or early in the morning. An asthma cough is usually associated with other symptoms of asthma such as wheeze, allergy (eczema or hayfever), or a family history of asthma and allergy. If coughing is the only problem the child has it is very unlikely to be due to asthma
- Whooping cough. (for further information on whooping cough visit kidshealth.org.nz)
- Croup – usually a harsh or barking cough. For further information on croup see the fact sheet on “What is croup?”, visit our website asthmaandrespiratory.org.nz or visit kidshealth.org.nz

- Smoke exposure – second hand cigarette smoke commonly causes children to cough even when they are well. Make sure your child's environment is smoke-free. Put smoke-free stickers up to let everyone know your home and car are smoke-free. If you want to give up smoking, you can call the Quitline on 0800 778 778 or visit the Quit website quit.org.nz or ask your health professional

The Asthma and Respiratory Foundation NZ can help you

The Asthma and Respiratory Foundation NZ is New Zealand's not-for-profit sector authority on asthma and other respiratory illnesses. We advocate to government and raise awareness of respiratory illnesses, fund research for better treatments and educate on best practice.

Check out our comprehensive website at asthmaandrespiratory.org.nz

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