

## Habit cough in Children

### What are the characteristics of habit cough?

The cough in habit cough tends to be dry and harsh, often barking in nature, and does not produce sputum. The cough tends to occur frequently during the day but disappears completely during sleep. A habit cough often originates from a typical upper respiratory infection, but while the rest of the symptoms disappear, the cough persists, usually for months. A habit cough can be very troublesome for the child and family, and often interferes with school. Habit cough is particularly common in children between the ages of 6 and 12.



### What causes habit cough?

We are not sure of the cause of habit cough. Children will have the feeling that they have something in their throat and need to cough to get rid of it. Because the cough does not remove the sensation children tend to cough repeatedly and forcefully. The more they cough the more they have the sensation that something is there. In the vast majority of cases the cough is not 'put on' by the child as they do have the sensation that they need to cough.

### Is habit cough a cause for concern?

No. This is a benign condition that resolves spontaneously. The fact that a child develops a habit cough is not a phenomenon that parents should worry about and does not suggest neurological or behavioural problems.

### How do I know there is nothing else going on?

We can be very confident on the basis of the history (if clearly taken and comprehensively given) that a cough represents a habit. For the amount of coughing involved in a habit cough, the medical causes are usually easy to exclude. For example if a child had asthma that made them cough so much during the day there would be lots of coughing during sleep. If persistent infection was the cause there would be lots of sputum production and coughing during sleep also. When a cough is so prevalent during the day and completely absent during sleep, there can be no other cause. Investigations are not needed if there is an obvious history.

### How do we get rid of a habit cough?

Not surprisingly treatment with antibiotics and asthma medications will have no effect. The first step in managing a habit cough is understanding what it is and being reassured that there is nothing else going on. Often this information is sufficient for some parents, who can work with their child to help them to stop coughing. It is vitally important not to blame or criticise a child or use terms like 'it's all in your head'. A partnership approach is needed where we help the child to overcome the cough themselves.



A number of different approaches can help to break the link between the sensation of the need to cough and the act of coughing. To a certain extent this depends on the child's age and intellectual level. There are a few useful principles to help extinguish the cough

- **Assure the child that they are not at fault**

We will sometimes tell the child that their body is trying to 'trick' them into coughing. We can make a link between this and a cartoon or TV character who plays tricks on people. We can tell the child that we are going to have to trick their body back by not coughing when it expects them to. We might also point out that at times if we ignore an itch it can go away without scratching.

- **Provide a strategy to help break the cycle**

An example here would be taking a deep breath and swallowing, or counting backwards from 5 to 1 as they breathe out. This should be done when the urge to cough is there. We can tell the child that this will help them to get rid of the feeling that they need to cough. It doesn't really matter what we ask the child to do when the urge to cough is present (as long as it's not complicated), just that it makes them aware of the trigger and gets them to understand that they can control it.

- **Reinforce the fact that the cough will resolve**

We can ask the child what they are going to do when the cough is gone – perhaps the parents can arrange for a trip to a cinema or some other activity that can be seen as a focus to aim towards, a treat and some sort of activity that benefits from not coughing.