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**Patient information: Cough in children (The Basics)**

*Written by the doctors and editors at UpToDate*

**What is a cough?** — A cough is an important reflex that helps clear out the body's airways (the branching tubes that carry air within the lungs). Coughing also helps keep people from breathing things into the airways and lungs that could cause problems ([figure 1](#)).

It is normal for children to cough once in a while. But sometimes, a cough is a symptom of an illness or condition.

Coughs are called “dry” if they don't bring up mucus, and “wet” if they do. The sound of your child's cough can be different depending on if it is wet or dry. Some coughs are mild, but others are severe. A severe cough can make it hard to breathe.

**What causes a cough?** — The most common causes of a cough in children are:

- Infections of the airways or lungs (including the common cold)
- Having an object stuck in an airway
- Asthma – This is a lung condition that can make it hard to breathe.
- Other lung problems, including conditions that some children are born with
- Coughing out of habit. This type of cough usually goes away when a child is sleeping.

**Should my child see a doctor or nurse?** — See the doctor or nurse right away if your child:

- Is younger than 3 months old
- Is having trouble breathing, has noisy breathing, or is breathing very fast ([figure 2](#))
- Gets a cough after he or she choked on food or another object, even if he or she choked on the object days or weeks ago
- Is coughing up blood, or yellow or green mucus
- Refuses to drink anything for a long time
- Has a fever and is not acting like him- or herself
- Is coughing so hard that he or she vomits
- Has had the cough for more than 2 weeks

**Will my child need tests?** — Maybe. The doctor or nurse will ask questions about your child's symptoms and examine him or her. He or she might do tests, depending on your child's age and other symptoms. There are different tests doctors can do to see what's causing a cough. The most common ones include:

- A chest X-ray
- Tests to check for an infection – For example, the doctor can use a cotton swab to collect a sample from the inside of your child's nose or throat. Then he or she will do lab tests on the sample.
- Breathing tests – Breathing tests involve breathing hard into a tube. These tests show how the lungs are working. Most children 6 years old and older are able to do breathing tests.
- Bronchoscopy – This is a procedure in which a doctor uses a thin tube with a camera on the end (called a “bronchoscope”) to look inside your child's airways. If the doctor finds an object stuck in your child's airway, he or she can remove it during this procedure.

**Is there anything I can do to help get rid of my child's cough?** — Yes. If your child's cough is from a cold, the croup, or another infection, you can:

- Have him or her drink lots of fluids.
- Use a humidifier in his or her bedroom.
- Sit in the bathroom with him or her while you run hot water in the shower.

There are certain things you should NOT do:

- Do NOT give over-the-counter cough and cold medicines to children, especially if they are younger than 6 years old. Cough and cold medicines are not likely to help, and they can cause serious problems in young children.
- Do NOT give [aspirin](#) to children younger than 18 years old. Aspirin can cause a life-threatening condition called Reye syndrome in young people.

**How is a cough treated?** — Treatment depends on the cause of your child's cough. For example:

- Some infections are treated with antibiotic medicines. If an infection is caused by bacteria, doctors can treat it with antibiotics. If an infection is caused by a virus (such as the common cold), doctors cannot treat it with antibiotics.
- Asthma is treated with medicines that a child breathes into his or her lungs.
- If your child has an object stuck in his or her airway, the doctor can do bronchoscopy to look for it and remove it.

Doctors do not usually prescribe medicines that quiet a cough to children. These medicines don't usually work well, and they can have serious side effects in children.

### More on this topic

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[Patient information: Acute bronchitis \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient information: Asthma in children \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient information: Pneumonia in adults \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient information: Bronchiolitis \(and RSV\) \(The Basics\)](#)

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[Patient information: Whooping cough \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient information: Giving your child over-the-counter medicines \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient information: Coughing up blood \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient information: Asthma symptoms and diagnosis in children \(Beyond the Basics\)](#)

[Patient information: Bronchiolitis \(and RSV\) in infants and children \(Beyond the Basics\)](#)

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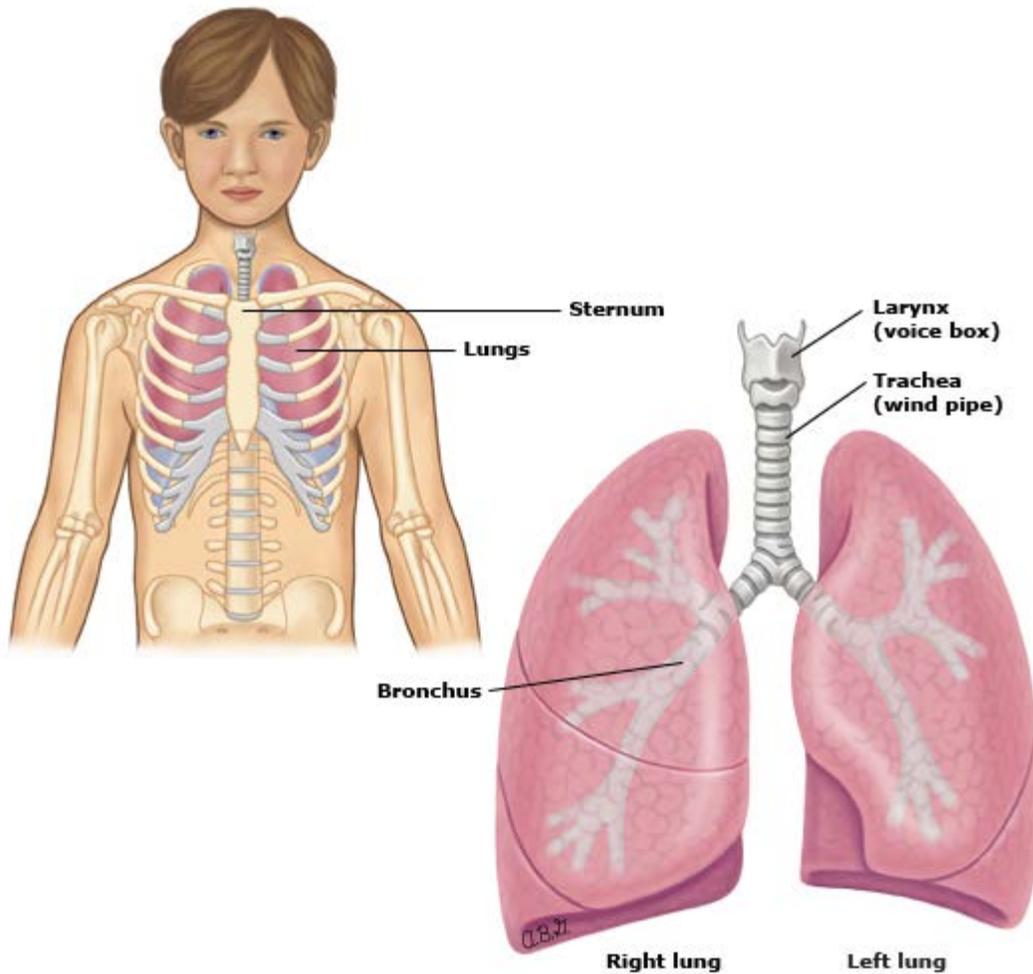
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Topic 16897 Version 4.0

## GRAPHICS

### Lungs in a healthy child

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This is what the lungs of a healthy child look like. They sit on the left and right sides of the upper chest, inside the ribcage. When a child takes a breath, air comes in through the nose and mouth, goes down the throat, and into the main airway leading to the lungs called the "trachea". The trachea branches into the left and right bronchus, which carry air to each lung.

Graphic 56535 Version 6.0

## Signs of severe trouble breathing (retractions)

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**Normal**



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When a child is having a lot of trouble breathing, the skin and muscles between the child's ribs or below the child's ribcage look like they are caving in.

Graphic 59786 Version 1.0

