



Pharmacy Self Care Health Facts Column

By John Bell - 27 August 2008

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Choosing the right strategy to treat your cough

A recent article in *New Scientist* magazine (23 August 2008) highlighted the significance of the placebo effect; that is the power of belief in a medicine to provide better health outcomes and the extra benefit of support systems and “tender loving care”.

There is no doubt that these factors are especially important when it comes to treating coughs and colds. Nevertheless, it's also important to choose evidence-based strategies to relieve the symptoms.

Just as occurred 90 years ago during the so-called Spanish Flu of 1918 some health workers are again advocating the use of face masks to help prevent the spread of severe respiratory disease.

Of course there are other precautions we can take too. Influenza infection is spread principally by droplets of viruses and bacteria being coughed up by one person and inhaled by another. However, colds and flu can literally be caught! We are all taught to politely cover our mouths when we cough; but viruses, particularly the cold virus, can survive on the hand for hours, and the hand to hand contact of greeting or affection can result in unhealthy consequences.

Coughing or sneezing into disposable tissues rather than hands or a handkerchief is a far better option. Medically speaking, a cough is the automatic defensive action our body employs to clear and protect our lungs from such things as dust, foreign bodies, smoke, fumes and viral and bacterial infections. We cough with such force that the explosion of air from the lungs travels at a speed of approximately 900km an hour and may propel bacteria and virus particles up to 240cm. That's real germ-spreading power.

We might be just about leaving our last official month of winter, but cold and flu conditions could be with us for a while yet and September is sometimes a peak time for respiratory infections. So if you haven't had a cold yet this year, chances are you're still a strong candidate to experience those miserable symptoms. Some people who are unlucky or ill-prepared might even get the flu. Chances are, therefore, you will need to seek the advice of your pharmacist to recommend an effective product to relieve those frustrating symptoms. Firstly, there are a number of coping strategies you can use to minimise the discomfort: drink plenty of fluid, get plenty of rest and eat a well-balanced diet with plenty of fruit and vegetables to supply natural anti-oxidants – all strengthen the immune system. And of course, depending on the type of cough and cold symptoms you have, you might choose to take a medicine to make life a little more bearable.

A cough may be classified as “productive” where you have plenty of mucus or phlegm irritating the airways and just itching to be coughed up, or it may be described as “dry” – nagging and annoying to the person with the cough and all those close enough to be within earshot.

Coughs may also be described as “acute” or “chronic”. Acute coughs are generally caused by a viral or bacterial infection – perhaps a cold, the flu or pneumonia. They may also be caused by a foreign body or environmental pollutants such as smoke or fumes. Chronic coughs, those lasting many weeks or months, are usually caused by cigarette smoking (both active and passive smoking). The most likely causes of chronic cough in non-smokers are post-nasal drip, asthma and gastro-oesophageal reflux disease. Some prescription medicines, especially those used to treat high blood pressure, may also cause a chronic cough. So a cough mixture may not be the solution to a chronic cough problem.

However long the duration of your cough, whether you've got a hacking cough or just a tickle and especially if you're taking other medicines, check with your pharmacist before you self select a treatment.

And ask for one of the fact cards titled *Cough or Colds and Flu*. They're available from pharmacies around Australia providing the Pharmaceutical Society's Self Care health information.

Phone 1300 369 772 for the nearest location.