

Can't Stop Coughing? Some Answers To Common Questions

by Matt Sheehan

December 16 2023 7:30 AM



Key Takeaways:

- If you have mild symptoms, take an at-home COVID-19 test
- Wash your hands
- Stay at home if you are sick
- Cover your cough
- Use over-the-counter medications to treat mild symptoms at home

Can't stop coughing? It's a common question happening with all of the upper respiratory illness going around including colds, flu and RSV.

Maybe two weeks ago you had a virus, you treated the symptoms with antibiotics, you're feeling much better, but the cough is just lingering. Juanbosco Ayala, MD, is a pulmonologist in the Intensive Care Unit (ICU) at OSF Little Company of Mary Medical Center in Evergreen Park, Illinois. He provides medical care to patients on a daily basis, especially people who have breathing disorders and lung disease, and explains potential reasons why coughs linger.

"A lot of times it's due to the local inflammation that persists. There's not much to do for it, we typically recommend antihistamines, and sometimes you'll have to cycle those," Dr. Ayala says. "It's usually something that subsides with time. But if it doesn't, then obviously that may need to be looked at."

Antihistamines can include Claritin-D, Benadryl, Allegra and more. These can be found over the counter and do not require a prescription.

For many, colder temperatures bring on an uptick in mucus in your throat. For this, Dr. Ayala says another over the counter option, Mucinex, may be a good choice for you.

Dr. Ayala recommends keeping a close eye on your symptoms. As more people are getting colds and viruses this time of year, it's important to not let local hospitals get overrun if you can treat your symptoms at home.

"As long as you don't have some of the red flags, like a persistent fever, high-grade fever that lasts more than one to three days. Something that won't go away, despite using temporary measures like Tylenol or Motrin. If this persists more than two or three days, this might be something that needs to be looked at," Dr. Ayala says.

Dr. Ayala has seen an uptick in COVID-19 patients.

"There's been a noticeable increase. Some of the recent strains may not be as lethal or severe, yet they continue to spread easily from person to person," Dr. Ayala emphasizes.

Should you go to the doctor?

COVID-19, RSV, strep and the flu are very contagious, but usually can be treated at home. If you have symptoms such as cough or sore throat, but they are mild and you do

not have a high risk health condition, you can take a COVID-19 test at home and treat your symptoms with over-the-counter medications.

Go to the doctor if you...

Have symptoms that haven't gotten better after 10 days, have difficulty breathing, or have a preexisting condition like diabetes, asthma, or COPD. If you have white spots on the back of your throat, this is a clear sign of an infection and will need medical intervention prescribed by a licensed medical provider.

How to stay healthy

Wash your hands, cover your cough and stay home if you're sick.