

Why Are You Coughing?

(NAPSA)—Coughs can be a real annoyance, but they serve an important purpose, helping to clear mucus and foreign material like dust from your airways. Most coughs are caused by the common cold, but a violent or persistent cough shouldn't be ignored.

Coughs lasting three weeks or less are most often caused by a cold, but they might be a sign of more serious illness. Pneumonia can cause coughing, high fever, shortness of breath, rapid breathing and chest pain. Congestive heart failure, a condition where the heart can't pump enough blood, can cause coughing, shortness of breath, difficulty breathing, fatigue and swelling.

"Chronic" coughs lasting three weeks or more are often caused by postnasal drip, mucus draining down the back of your throat, from allergies. But they can also be a sign of more serious underlying medical problems. Asthma can cause chronic coughing, chest tightness, wheezing and trouble breathing. Lung cancer causes a chronic cough, chest pain, shortness of breath and other symptoms. Tuberculosis causes a chronic, debilitating cough and chest pain.

Gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD) can cause chronic coughing, too. When the opening between the esophagus, which carries food from the mouth to the stomach, and the stomach doesn't close properly, stomach contents can leak back or reflux, into the



esophagus. This can cause heartburn, trouble swallowing, bad breath and a dry cough.

A cough that won't go away and produces lots of mucus may be a sign of chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), in which the lung is damaged, making it hard to breathe. Most often caused by smoking, COPD is the 4th leading cause of death.

Cough drops and other treatments may help your coughing, but if you develop a violent cough or one that lasts for more than 3 weeks, see your health provider to make sure it's not a sign of a serious health problem.

—A report from *NIH News in Health*, a publication of the National Institutes of Health (newsinhealth.nih.gov). For more information on the conditions mentioned in this story, search the NIH Health Information Page at health.nih.gov.