

<http://www.psa.org.au/selfcare>

## Checking out the causes of coughs and colds

It is almost 90 years ago that surgical masks were a common sight in Australian cities. In fact, it was way back during the so-called “Spanish flu” of 1918. The flu then caused an estimated 50 million deaths worldwide, including around 12,000 Australians out of a population at the time of less than 5 million.

More recently, in 2005 and 2006, some health workers advocated the use of face masks to help prevent the spread of SARS - severe acute respiratory syndrome. Then again, last year the use of face masks was promoted to reduce the likely spread of swine flu.

Of course there are other precautions we can take too. Respiratory infections are 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 can survive on the hand for hours, and even the hand to hand contact of a simple greeting can result in unhealthy consequences.

Coughing or sneezing into disposable tissues rather than hands or a handkerchief is a far better option. If no tissue is available try coughing or sneezing into the inside of you elbow.

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 900kms an hour and may propel bacteria and virus particles up to 240cm. That’s real germ-spreading power.

Most people will get a cold this winter; some who are unlucky or ill-prepared might even get the flu. So chances are you will need to seek the advice of your pharmacist to recommend something to relieve those frustrating symptoms.

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 simple strategies to 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 form of smoking). The most likely causes of chronic cough in non-smokers are post-nasal drip, asthma and so-called gastro-oesophageal reflux disease (a more persistent and usually severe form of heartburn). Some prescription medicines, especially those used to treat high blood pressure may also cause a chronic cough.

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 or check out the Pharmaceutical Society website at [www.psa.org.au](http://www.psa.org.au) (click on *Self Care Pharmacy Finder*) for the nearest location.