

Living with a 6-8 Week Cough

COVID-19, respiratory syncytial virus (RSV) and influenza cases are all on the decline since the beginning of 2024 according to data reported by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

But many patients who experience one of these respiratory illnesses might have another round of symptoms heading their way.

Lingering, nagging cough persists

“A lot of patients have displayed symptoms that would justify going on an antibiotic,” says Juanbosco Ayala, MD, pulmonologist with OSF HealthCare. “They get over the acute phase, experiencing symptoms like body aches, fever, chills and productive wet cough. With the antibiotic, in time, things seem to get better. Then after that acute phase, this lingering, nagging cough happens.”

For many, it’s a six-to-eight-week cough. For others, it can last up to 100 days. Dr. Ayala says over-the-counter options are your best bet at managing symptoms.

“As long as they’re over that acute phase and we don’t have other signs of superimposed infection, over-the-counter medications will go a long way,” Dr. Ayala says. “That’s also making sure that they don’t have other causes of the cough. Things like GERD (gastroesophageal reflux disease), gastritis, reflux disease, asthma, or other things that might come up.”

What over-the-counter medications should I look for?

Dr. Ayala says antihistamines and nasal sprays are a great starting point.

“Some of them have a little more of a sedative effect, so some patients will get sleepy. They all may cause sleepiness to a certain degree. But some are less likely to, like Claritin-D, Allegra and even Zyrtec,” Dr. Ayala says. “Some of the nasal sprays, if patients complain about congestion, might be something to consider. Other than that, whether it’s the pharmacy brand, generic, or name brand, they all work pretty well when it comes to the antihistamines.”

If you are experiencing a major change in mucus, such as the color or amount of mucus produced, Dr. Ayala says Mucinex is a good choice.

Experiencing increased coughing at night?

Coughing more at night can be a common occurrence for patients who are experiencing the post-infectious cough. But Dr. Ayala says the night-time cough is something providers can worry about, because it may signal something else, such as asthma.

“With issues during sleep, we have to make sure there isn’t anything else related to sleep apnea or sleep disorder breathing, that may be playing a role,” Dr. Ayala adds.

If you're experiencing milder symptoms but still would like to speak with a medical professional, [OSF OnCall Virtual Urgent Care](#) is available 24/7. A provider can make an assessment, order prescriptions, recommend over-the-counter medications, or suggest an in-person visit. You can Live Chat with our chatbot Clare, tell her your symptoms and she'll direct you to the right place for care or she can connect you with a nurse. You can also go to the [Get Care Now](#) tab on the OSF website.