

The Cough That Won't Stop!

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This is the time of year that finds a lot of children coughing. Many of them are simply battling acute colds and their cough goes away after a few days. But what about the ones that keep going.....on and on and on?

First of all, one must remember that our cough reflex is an important protective mechanism of our body. Coughing helps to rid the lungs and airways of germs and excessive mucus. The inability to cough effectively makes one prone to choking, aspiration and pneumonia. However, a persistent cough is not only annoying, but may indicate the presence of a more serious problem that needs to be addressed.

The vast majority of persistent or frequent coughs in children are caused by respiratory infections. Most of these are viral and will resolve on their own. Some of the more serious viral respiratory infections include RSV (respiratory syncytial virus) and croup. Other respiratory infections are caused by bacteria and are treatable with antibiotics, such as pertussis (whooping cough), sinusitis and pneumonia. Tests such as nasal swabs and X-rays may help diagnose these in uncertain situations.

Some persistent coughs are caused by allergies or asthma. The “atopic triad” is a group of 3 conditions – allergies, asthma and eczema – which often occur together in affected individuals. This trait of “atopy” tends to run in families, although not all family members may be affected and all three conditions are not always present. If an infectious reason for persistent cough is not found, allergy testing is often recommended. The diagnosis of asthma in children is challenging because it is difficult to obtain breathing tests (spirometry) on them, so often a trial of asthma medication is suggested to see if there is a positive response. Gastroesophageal reflux can occasionally trigger an asthmatic cough as well.

Other reasons for persistent cough include a nervous habit, choking on a piece of food or foreign body (such as a coin) and more serious problems like cystic fibrosis, immune deficiencies and anatomic abnormalities. If your child has a daily cough that persists for longer than a few weeks, please bring it to our attention by scheduling an office visit for further evaluation.