



Coughing - What causes it?

Coughing is an important defensive reflex of the human body. In order to remove mucus, dust or foreign bodies from the respiratory tract, air is emitted like an explosion - with the speed of a hurricane. Special receptors are responsible for this occurrence, which are located in the bronchial tubes, windpipe, larynx and the pharynx. If these sensors are irritated e.g. by the accumulation of mucus, they send signals to the brain, which then triggers a cough reflex. Besides this spontaneous reaction, one can also cough consciously and intentionally.

How does coughing develop?

Coughing is not an independent disease, but it is a symptom that occurs in various diseases. Acute respiratory tract infections such as cold and bronchitis are the most significant trigger factors. Infections mostly caused by viruses lead to an inflammation in the respiratory tract and – along with it or soon after – to an increased mucus production. Both these occurrences cause an irritation of the throat. Millions of cilia existing in the mucous membrane are responsible for keeping the bronchi clean. In case of an infection, this cleaning system reaches its limits and the coughing helps in throwing out the viscous mucus and along with it, the pathogenic agent out of the respiratory tracts.

What are the symptoms of coughing?

Coughing in respiratory tract infections is mostly dry in the beginning. Subsequently, the increased production of mucus that enters into the mouth with the bout of coughing becomes more conspicuous. Sometimes the mucus is white-transparent, but it can also be yellowish or greenish in color. The latter does not mean that the person has a bacterial infection. Coughing is often accompanied by other symptoms of the infection such as catarrh, sore throat, hoarseness, headache, fatigue and even fever. These symptoms usually subside within a few days. But the coughing can last up to four weeks following a cold, flu or bronchitis.

Acute coughing - What can I do?

Respiratory tract infections and coughing associated with them usually heal even without medicines and with no consequences. As this concerns an important cleaning mechanism, cough suppressants should be used only in exceptional cases. Many patients feel better with steam inhalation. Herbal supplements can be taken to support the healing process such as supplements based on thyme, although hardly any research has been carried out to examine their effectiveness. An intake of adequate but not excessive fluids is important. Avoiding physical exertion helps in the healing process. Smoking - active or passive - must be avoided if you are coughing. Antibiotics often act as lifesavers when you suffer from bacterial infection, however they do not have any effect against the majority of respiratory tract infections, which are usually caused by viruses. Therefore antibiotic treatment is usually not necessary for coughing. An exceptional case is the bacterial lung infection that constitutes a very small percentage of all the infections of the respiratory tract.