

# Coughing Concerns

Although coughing is our body's most common reaction to irritation in the respiratory tract, some types of coughs are more sinister than others. Dr Goh Kee San, Respiratory Medicine Consultant at Ara Damansara Medical Centre shares with us the different types of causes of chronic cough.

**A COUGH IS DEFINED** as a sudden and often repetitively occurring protective reflex intended by the body to help clear the large breathing passage from a variety of obstructions, such as fluids, irritants, foreign particles and microbes. A cough process entails three steps: the inhalation, followed by a forced exhalation against a closed glottis, and a violent release of air from the lungs following opening of the glottis.

Incessant coughing is usually a reliable indicator of the presence of a disease. As many viruses and bacteria benefit from cough as a mean of dispersion, chronic cough—that is coughing which lasts for more than two weeks—must be diagnosed immediately. In addition to viral or bacterial respiratory tract infection, coughing is also triggered by various other reasons, including post-nasal drip, acid reflux, COPD,

chronic bronchitis, lung tumours, and medications like ACE inhibitors.

"From our observation, most of the time chronic cough is caused by a viral infection in the upper airway tract. Viral infection usually resolves itself in less than two weeks but what happens is that the infection had caused some inflammation in the throat and that causes a persistent irritation, which leads to prolonged cough sometimes up to a few months even though the infection is no more," explains Dr Goh.

"Another common cause is the post-nasal drip, meaning that the patient has a persistent flu or common cold which causes the mucous to keep dripping back along the throat. This again causes irritation and inflammation of the throat. If the patient does not settle the flu then it will keep on irritating the throat and cause cough," he continues.

The more dangerous type of infection, however, is the bacterial kind. Although amounting to only 10 per cent of the types of infection that leads to chronic cough,

bacterial infection causes more serious inflammation of the throat called pharyngitis, which requires a more specific medication such as antibiotics. This type of infection could also affect the tonsils, leading to tonsillitis or the voice box, causing laryngitis. Symptoms of bacterial infection include loss of appetite, prolonged fever and chronic cough.

"As for the lower airway, common causes of cough include pneumonia and tuberculosis (TB). The latter is still under-recognised by our public but in the medical setting we do see it quite a lot because our country is still endemic for TB. With TB, the act of coughing itself is not infectious but the infecting agent will stay in the droplets produced by cough and is capable staying in the atmosphere for hours. The germ then spreads to the next person when the droplets are inhaled," elucidates Dr Goh.

In 2015, Malaysia was classified as a country with intermediate TB burden as the notification rate for TB was 79.4 cases per 100,000 of population, amounting to about 24,000 cases in total. The same year, 1,696 deaths were recorded to be TB-related, the highest among all infectious diseases

noted in the country.

"It is imperative that patients come to us to test for TB if their cough continues for more than two weeks together with loss of appetite and fever particularly in the evenings. We will test their phlegm for the bacteria and if they test positive we will immediately begin the treatment. Most patients already have latent TB infection, which activates itself when the immune system becomes weak," Dr Goh clarifies.

More severe cases of tuberculosis could also lead to a more permanent damage in the form of lung scarring. Also known as bronchiectasis, this condition is usually an aftermath of TB and causes patients to have breathlessness and continuous coughing with even blood. However, sudden coughing of blood is a red flag that patients must immediately attend to according to Dr Goh.

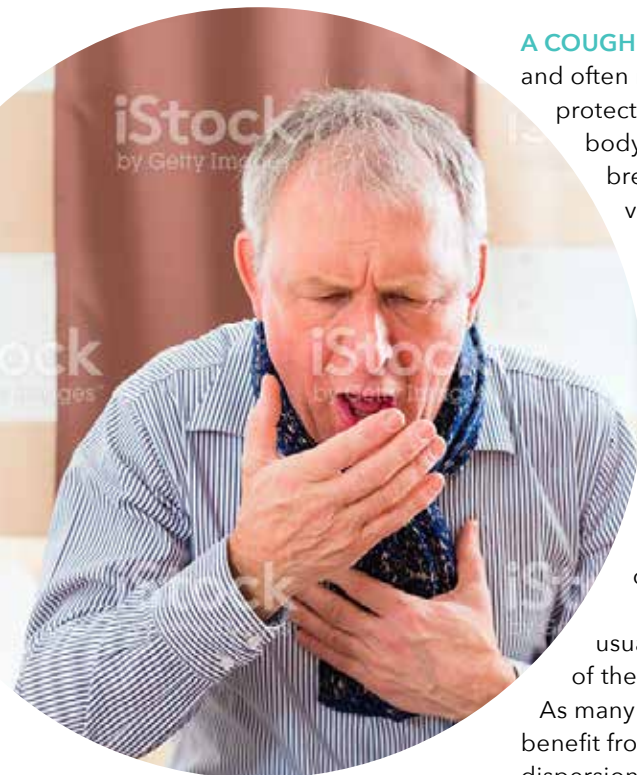
"Although sometimes coughing up blood could be due to rigorous cough that injures the throat and causes blood in the phlegm, it could also potentially be an indicator of an abnormality in the lung, such as lung cancer," he illuminates.

What are some of the preventative measures that one

could practise to avoid being a victim of chronic cough?

"Well for starters, avoid standing in front of people who are coughing. The droplets released during the cough will stay in the air depending on the level of humidity, which is quite high in our country. If your immune system is strong you can fight the germs but if you have medical issues there is a higher likelihood of getting respiratory infections," says Dr Goh.

"When you begin coughing, you could try self-medicating with cough syrup and honey. If it's a general viral infection or the common cold, the symptomatic treatment will alleviate the mucous and soothe the throat. For throat care, please drink a lot of water especially to drain out the mucous. Also avoid allergens and other pollutants like the smoke from cigarettes," he asserts. ■



Dr Goh Kee San

Text: Eswaren Sekar



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