

If Your Cat Does This Longer Than 3 Weeks, Don't Ignore It

There are many underlying causes of this chronic symptom, so it's important to get it diagnosed if it lasts longer than 2 to 3 weeks. It can develop suddenly or gradually, but watch for these other signs that can signal distress. The age and breeds most at risk.

Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- There are several feline disorders that have coughing as a symptom. The most common cause of persistent coughing in cats is chronic bronchopulmonary disease, which is a group of conditions that includes feline asthma
- Because there are so many underlying causes of chronic coughing, it's very important to accurately diagnose your cat's cough
- Treatment involves identifying and resolving the underlying cause of the cough, as well as alleviating the cough itself

Editor's Note: This article is a reprint. It was originally published May 17, 2016.

If your cat has a persistent (chronic) cough, it's almost always a sign of an underlying problem. Coughing is a protective reflex designed to clear away irritants in the throat, voice box, windpipe, or airways.

A cough is also the body's way of preventing kitty from aspirating (inhaling) fluids or foreign matter into her lungs, however, it also interferes with her ability to breathe normally.

Coughing is one of the most powerful reflexes in the body, and plays a crucial role in protecting against an invasion, obstruction, or abnormality of your cat's airways. The medical term for coughing is tussis.

Underlying Causes for Coughing in Cats

A persistent cough can be a sign of many underlying diseases and disorders, including:¹

- Sinus inflammation (sinusitis)
- Enlarged heart
- Throat or tonsil inflammation
- Airway collapse
- Upper airway obstruction
- Bronchial irritation, inflammation, or obstruction (bronchitis)
- Elongated soft palate

- Bacterial, fungal, viral infection
- Polyp(s) in the throat
- Environmental irritants, allergies
- Disease of the larynx (voice box)
- Bronchiectasis
- Breathing problems
- Bronchial foreign body
- Tracheal obstruction or collapse
- Fluid in the lungs
- Mediastinal mass
- Heartworm disease
- Disease or dilation of the esophagus
- Infectious or aspiration pneumonia
- Disease of the lymph nodes
- Lung granuloma
- Parasitic infection, lungworms
- Autoimmune disease of the lungs
- Inflammation or infection of the trachea
- Tumor of the lungs, trachea or airways
- Asthma
- Blood clots in the lung

In cats, the most common cause of persistent coughing is chronic bronchopulmonary disease, which is actually a group of conditions that includes feline asthma, chronic bronchitis, chronic broncho-pneumonia, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), and emphysema.

What to Watch For and Cats at Highest Risk

The primary symptom in cats is a cough that can develop suddenly or gradually and lasts for more than two or three weeks. If your kitty has an occasional, infrequent cough, it's typically nothing to worry about. But a chronic cough should be evaluated by your veterinarian.

Other signs to watch for are wheezing, shortness of breath, respiratory distress, and retching at the end of a coughing episode that clears mucus from the throat. The most common age for a chronic cough to develop in cats is from two to eight years. Oriental breeds, including Siamese and Burmese, seem predisposed.

Often, cats with chronic coughing also have a history of flu-like symptoms, seasonal allergic coughing, and triggers such as smoke, temperature changes, aerosol sprays, dusty litter, and sleeping on their owners' beds.

Diagnosing a Chronic Cough

Since there are so many different diseases that feature coughing as a symptom, it's important to insure the underlying cause of your kitty's persistent cough is accurately diagnosed.

The first step in investigating a cat's cough is to determine whether he's actually coughing. sneezing, gagging, retching, and vomiting can look and sound similar to coughing.

Your veterinarian will also take a history of your cat's health and current symptoms, including how long coughing episodes last, how often they occur, the pattern with which they occur, and other characteristics. He or she will also want to determine whether the cough is productive or non-productive.

Your vet will perform a physical examination on your cat, take chest x-rays, a complete blood count (CBC), biochemistry profile, and other blood tests as indicated. Blood test results can point to the presence of infection, allergies, elevated liver enzymes, and other abnormalities.

A heartworm test may be performed, along with a urinalysis and fecal testing to check for respiratory parasites. To get a closer, more detailed look at your cat's respiratory tract, your veterinarian may use a laryngoscope, tracheoscope, or bronchoscope to view the upper respiratory tract. Your vet may also want to take lung fluid samples from your cat's respiratory tract.

Treatment Options

Goals of treatment are to identify and resolve the underlying cause of your cat's cough, along with controlling the cough itself. Treatment may require hospitalization in cases of significant disease. Oxygen will be administered to kitties who have trouble breathing. Antimicrobials may be required to resolve infection, and cough suppressants may or may not be given. Typically, suppressing the cough doesn't fix the problem, and can actually mask it, allowing it to worsen.

Cats with a cough should not be exposed to airway irritants of any kind. Make sure your furnace filters are changed as often as necessary, and if possible, invest in an air purifier as well. If you are a smoker, I recommend not smoking in your house and wash your hands before petting your cat.

I also recommend providing only organic cat beds and sleeping surfaces that are PBDE (flame retardant) free. Your cat should be provided a stress-free living environment, and if she's overweight, she should be safely and gradually dieted down to a healthy size.

Under **NO** circumstances should you ever administer human medications to your cat. Even very small amounts of over-the-counter drugs such as Robitussin, aspirin, acetaminophen, and ibuprofen can be extremely toxic to kitties.

It's also important to follow dosing directions carefully if your veterinarian gives you a medication for your cat. Kitties are exceptionally sensitive to many medications and natural remedies, so it's important to be alert and aware when administering any sort of drug or supplement to your cat.

Additional Tips for Alleviating Your Cat's Coughing

- **Don't smoke** — Give up smoking around your pet and don't let others smoke around him. Second-hand smoke is a major trigger for sensitive cats.
- **Give up using your fireplace** — Smoke of any kind is a trigger for coughing in sensitive cats.
- **Reduce or eliminate all household sprays** — This includes grooming supplies, hairsprays and deodorants – anything that is aerosolized. Make sure kitty isn't in the same room with anyone spraying anything from a bottle or can.
- **Get rid of scented plug-ins, candles, incense, heated potpourri – anything that gives off an aroma** — Anything that emits a strong scent can be a trigger for sensitive cats and people as well.
- **Switch from chemical household cleaners to green cleaners.**
- **Gradually switch to an unscented, low-dust variety of cat litter** — Mix the new litter with the litter your cat is used to, and gradually phase out the old stuff. Also, don't use bleach to disinfect the box. Use dish soap or vinegar and rinse with warm water. That's all you need.
- **If you have pet pest problems, use an all-natural, safe pest repellent for flea and tick control.**
- **Make sure your cat's daily routine stays very consistent** — Kitties don't do well with changes in their environment, and any type of stress can be a potential trigger.
- **Feed a balanced, species-appropriate diet** — A species-appropriate diet means an anti-inflammatory diet for cats. It's important to reduce inflammation throughout your pet's body, and pro-inflammatory foods like carbohydrates exacerbate the problem.

Avoid feeding any type of food containing corn, wheat, rice or millet. Avoid grains completely. Unfortunately “grain free” foods that are high in starch (potato, tapioca, or legumes) can also create substantial inflammation in your cat's airways.

- **Consider switching your cat to a raw food diet and a new or novel protein source** — If your cat's chronic cough is a respiratory manifestation of a systemic allergic response, just switching away from the poultry or seafood, for example, that your cat may be addicted to can make a big difference.
- Partner with an **integrative veterinarian** who will not insist on unnecessary vaccines that can create systemic inflammation and confuse the immune system.

There are a variety of homeopathic remedies and drug-free therapies that are excellent at addressing coughing, depending on the symptoms exhibited by your cat.

Sources and References

[The Modesto Bee December 21, 2015](#)

[PetMD](#)

[PetPlace](#)

[Trudell Medical International](#)

¹ [PetPlace](#)
