

How to Deal With Incessant Coughing

BACKGROUND

A coughing pet is not normal and must be seen by a veterinarian to determine the cause of the cough. One exception to this rule is when coughing occurs in a dog only when the dog is pulling hard on a leash, because pressure on the trachea can cause coughing even in healthy dogs.

The most common causes of cough in dogs include heart disease, lung disease, chronic sterile bronchial disease of older adult dogs, collapsing trachea, and contagious tracheobronchitis (kennel cough). In cats, allergic airway disease (asthma) is by far the most common cause, with parasites, certain types of tumors, and foreign bodies occurring occasionally. Whatever the diagnosis, a cough may require treatment with medication in some cases but not others, and this determination should be made by your veterinarian.

GETTING STARTED

Acute coughing refers to coughing expected to last for 1 or 2 weeks or less. *Chronic coughing* is defined as lasting more than 2 weeks.

Acute coughing typically is caused by diseases that resolve on their own or with medication. Conversely, chronic coughing tends to be caused by diseases that are lifelong. Therefore, the approach to dealing with incessant coughing depends first and foremost on finding out what is causing the cough.

TROUBLESHOOTING BEFOREHAND

If your cat begins to breathe with his or her mouth open (panting like a dog), this is often an emergency, and you should call your veterinary hospital immediately. It is normal for dogs to breathe with their mouth open—just normal panting. If your dog shows any sign of labored or distressed breathing, however, call your veterinarian.

It is a very common misconception to think that a coughing dog or cat is “trying to cough something out.” However, inhaled foreign bodies are less common than other causes of coughing in dogs and cats (although not completely unheard of). Conditions that seem to cause tingling in the throat are very common, including heart disease, collapsing trachea, asthma, and many others. The cough that results from these conditions may look for all the world like an attempt to expel foreign material, but it is only a response to stimulation of the airways and should not be misinterpreted.

Occasionally, dogs will cough after increased activity or when they are obese. However, an examination by your veterinarian will help confirm that a primary respiratory or cardiac problem is or is not present as a cause of the cough.

In situations where there is severe coughing, you can check your pet’s gum color; it should be pink. Animals with gums that have suddenly changed from pink to white, very pale pink, or blue should be evaluated by a veterinarian promptly, because these changes may reflect poor circulation or poor oxygenation.

A very common impostor for coughing is *reverse sneezing*. These very loud, sudden, snoring-like sounds occur in the standing dog that appears to be snoring and retching at the same time. Reverse sneezing is usually a harmless process triggered by sensitivity or secretions in the nasal cavity and throat, and it can appear alarming but is essentially always of no consequence. One way of differentiating reverse sneezing from coughing is to open the dog’s mouth by hand while it is occurring; coughing can continue with the mouth open, but reverse sneezing stops immediately. Another

way is simply to capture a video clip (ideally with sound) while it is occurring and show it to the veterinarian. Or, you can easily find examples of reverse sneezing on the internet to compare to what you are seeing from your own dog.

PROCEDURE

Incessant coughing can be triggered or exacerbated by inhalation of airborne particles. Therefore, reducing or eliminating these triggers can make an enormous difference for the better. Known triggers for coughing in dogs and cats include:

- House dust
- Tobacco smoke
- Volatile scents (cedar chips in pet beds, carpet fresheners, etc.)
- Pollens (seasonal and geography dependent)
- Mold spores

Eliminating these and other similar inhaled substances can be curative of some coughs and can help many dogs and cats that suffer from chronic cough.

Techniques for improving the environment of a dog or cat with chronic cough include:

- Providing adequate ventilation in the home
- Providing adequate humidity (not too little, not too much; ambient humidity levels around 50% to 60% are good)
- Installing an air purifier or HEPA-type air filtration system
- Cessation of smoking
- Elimination of dust from areas where it has accumulated in the home

These techniques may also be beneficial to human occupants in the home if airway sensitivity is the cause of the dog or cat’s cough, and this acts as an early warning system for respiratory irritants in people. Dogs and cats, being lower to the ground than humans, may be more likely to cough because airborne particles (including smoke) tend to settle to the ground.

When a fit of coughing is occurring, sometimes to the point of causing a *terminal retch* (a vomit/gag-like hack that comes at the end of coughing and may produce foam or bile), it is best to let the pet continue to cough and finish. Coughing alone is rarely life threatening, but if it is accompanied by labored breathing and respiratory distress, an emergency visit to the veterinarian is warranted.

Depending on the specific cause of the cough, medications can be helpful in reducing or abolishing it. Coughs that are caused by serious lung or heart problems should be treated with daily medications that deal with the underlying problem; the cough can then improve this way. Coughs that do not affect how a dog or cat feels but are persistent may be helped with cough suppressants, bronchodilators, or other supportive medications that reduce the frequency and intensity of the cough. You should ask your veterinarian for instructions on when to give these medications and whether they can be increased as needed (and by how much) when coughing is especially bad. Keep in mind that **coughing occurring together with respiratory distress** (severely labored, anxious breathing with excessive respiratory effort and severe discomfort) **should be evaluated promptly**, even on emergency if needed, by your veterinarian.

In a pinch, taking the pet to breathe outdoor air can literally provide a breath of fresh air that calms a fit of coughing. Human pediatric cough syrups may sometimes be used, but only under strict recommendation from a veterinarian, because some contain

drugs like acetaminophen that are highly toxic to cats (especially) and sometimes to dogs.

AFTERWARDS

Your veterinarian will usually recommend a follow-up visit to check on the status and progress of your pet. If you are concerned before

the scheduled recheck appointment, call the hospital to schedule an earlier recheck or urgent visit.

Ask your veterinarian if a cough suppressant may be prescribed for your pet, based on the diagnosis. Not all medications can be given safely together. Keep all medications out of the reach of children.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

How long should I wait before I contact my veterinarian if my pet starts coughing?

It is not normal for your pet to cough, assuming this is not from pulling on a leash or just once with an obvious trigger (for example, walked through a dusty environment). Coughing justifies a visit to the veterinarian because it may be the first clue of a more serious problem that can be caught early.

Are there different types of coughs/sounds?

Yes. A “dry” cough will not produce mucus or discharge, whereas a “wet” cough will. However, the same disease can produce different types of coughs depending on the stage of the disease and any secondary infections or other complicating factors. Therefore, the “depth” (sound) of the cough is not as important as the frequency (how often—once a day, once a week?) of the cough, and you should be prepared to share this information with the veterinarian to arrive at a diagnosis of the underlying cause more readily.

Sometimes my cat makes horrible coughing/retching sounds. Is this an emergency?

Often, cats will “retch” or vomit a hairball. This is a common occurrence in cats and may or may not be accompanied by coughing. This is almost never an emergency. However, if your cat continues to retch, cough, or vomit, it would be prudent to make an appointment to have your cat evaluated.

Does cigarette smoke in the home have anything to do with coughing in dogs or cats?

Yes, secondhand smoke is a major factor in cats with asthma and dogs with chronic sterile bronchial disease (both very common problems). Medications can help in these conditions, but the single best way of reducing coughing is to stop exposing the animal to the smoke (i.e., quitting).

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