

Treating cough naturally

Cough is a common, protective reflex, but there's nothing more irritating than a cough that just won't go away. Doctors usually recommend over-the-counter (OTC) cough mixtures, but mounting evidence suggests that they just don't work. A recent review, involving 2166 individuals, found that, in 60 per cent of studies, cough medications were "no better than placebo" (BMJ, 2002; 324: 329-31).

In fact, some conventional cough suppressants may even be dangerous. Aside from the sugar and alcohol found in many OTC remedies, there is genuine concern over the use of dextromethorphan (DXM) and phenylpropanolamine (PPA). DXM, a semisynthetic narcotic related to opium, has a litany of adverse effects, including confusion, impaired judgement and mental function, blurred vision, slurred speech, loss of coordination, tremors, dizziness, nausea, abdominal pain, vomiting, paranoia and high blood pressure. It's also associated with spastic reactions in children (Eur J Paediatr Neurol, 2001; 5: 167-8). PPA (ephedrine) has been found to increase the risk of stroke in women by more than three times (N Engl J Med, 2000; 343: 1826-32).

Happily, there are a number of safe, natural remedies to turn to.

Herbal helpers

Many herbs have a rich history of use for cough associated with colds, bronchitis or other mild conditions. Among those shown to have antitussive (cough-suppressing) actions are marshmallow (*Althaea officinalis*) (Pharmazie, 1992; 47: 224-6), Indian gooseberry (*Emblica officinalis*) (Phytotherapy, 2003; 10: 583-9), orange coneflower (*Rudbeckia fulgida*) (Pharmazie, 2000; 55: 65-8) and sundew (*Drosera rotundifolia*) (Schilcher H. *Phytotherapy in Paediatrics*. Stuttgart: Medpharm Scientific Publishers, 1997: 38).

Other cough relievers

- ◆ **Homeopathy** offers many remedies to treat cough. *Bryonia* or *Drosera* may be especially useful.
- ◆ **Hydrotherapy** (hot- and/or cold-water applications to the body) can help relieve colds, coughs and other respiratory ailments. Symptoms may be improved by hot or cool steam from a humidifier (The Duke Center for Integrative Medicine, Liebowitz R, Smith L. *The Duke Encyclopedia of New Medicine*. Rodale, 2006).
- ◆ **Lozenges or honey and water** may help a dry cough with not much evidence of infection. For a homemade cough syrup, slice a large onion into rings, place them in a bowl, cover them with honey and leave to stand overnight. In the morning, strain off the onion/honey mixture and take as required (Br J Nutr, 1999; 82: 457-67)..

A number of herbs contain a gelatine-like substance called 'mucilage', which soothes the mucous membranes of the throat and, thus, may be useful for cough. These include mullein, plantain, slippery elm and *Usnea*. Other herbs, such as ivy leaf, soap bark and primula root, contain saponins, which are said to have expectorant effects.

Ivy leaf (*Hedera helix*), approved by Germany's Commission E, is classed for use against productive coughs and chronic inflammatory bronchial conditions (Townsend Lett Docs, 2005; Nov). In one trial of 1350 boys and girls aged four and over, cough tablets containing dried ivy-leaf extract improved symptoms of chronic bronchitis in 83-95 per cent of the children, and at least 38 per cent were completely free of their previous symptoms (Forsch Komplementarmed Klass Naturheilkd, 2002; 9: 77-84).

Another trial found ivy leaf to be just as effective as the conventional drug-treatment ambroxol in treating chronic bronchitis (Eur Respir J, 2006; 28: 330-8).

Finally, *Corse-E*, an Ayurvedic cough syrup based on a standard combination of five herbal extracts (holy basil, yellow-fruit nightshade, belleric myrobalan, liquorice and Malabar nut tree), was proved effective for treating cough in one clinical trial, although there was no comparison group. Frequency of cough was reduced significantly after four days and a reduction of symptoms was observed after, on average, two days (J Herb Pharmacother, 2004; 4: 1-12).

Chocolate

One promising study found that an ingredient in chocolate, theobromine, is more effective at stopping persistent coughs than codeine. Ten healthy volunteers were randomly given theobromine, codeine or a placebo, then exposed to capsaicin, a substance used in clinical research to cause coughing. Those given theobromine needed about one-third more capsaicin to produce coughing than those who took codeine. What's more, theobromine produced no side-effects. Codeine was only marginally more effective than the placebo at preventing coughing (FASEB J, 2005; 19: 231-3).

Traditional Chinese medicine

Cupping (using a glass cup to create suction over a patch of skin) is a traditional Chinese therapy often used to relieve a cough. An uncontrolled study of cupping reported a curative response in 35 out of 41 patients (J Tradit Chin Med, 1996; 16: 125). Other TCM therapies, including acupuncture and herbal medicine, may also be helpful.

Zinc

Several studies show that zinc lozenges can reduce the intensity of symptoms associated with a cold, particularly cough. In a randomized, double-blind study from the Detroit Medical Center in Michigan, cold duration was 4.5 days and cough duration was 3.1 days with zinc acetate lozenges compared with 8.1 and 6.3 days, respectively, with a placebo (Ann Intern Med, 2000; 133: 245-52).

H. C. Gaier