

Sarah's Surgery - Dr Sarah Brewer GP and expert in complementary medicine answers your questions



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complementary
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Cough remedies

Q I always thought there were different types of cough that need different types of treatment. Now I see there's a cough medicine that treats all types of coughs – does that mean other syrups are pointless?

A Good question! A cough is a reaction to irritation within the throat or airways – but a dry or tickly cough is very different to whooping or smokers' coughs. It is described as productive if it brings up phlegm, or non-productive if it is dry and tickly. Underlying causes range from respiratory infections and lung diseases to asthma, acid

reflux and even the side effects of drugs. That's why I'm not too keen on treating a cough until the underlying cause is diagnosed. Red flag symptoms include fever, sweats, weight loss, coughing up blood or significant breathlessness – if you develop these, see your doctor as soon as possible. The new all-in-one cough medicine (Unicough, £8.95, pharmacies) contains an antihistamine (diphenhydramine) to reduce irritation that triggers the cough reflex, ammonium chloride, a traditional expectorant (to help bring up phlegm) and levomenthol to help relieve congestion. It also contains cocoa to soothe the throat. So, rather than treating one type of cough, as the name implies, it seems to me that it's hedging its bets and treating everything! Your pharmacist can advise whether or not it is likely to suit you, or whether you should see your GP first.

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