

## Coughing in Cats

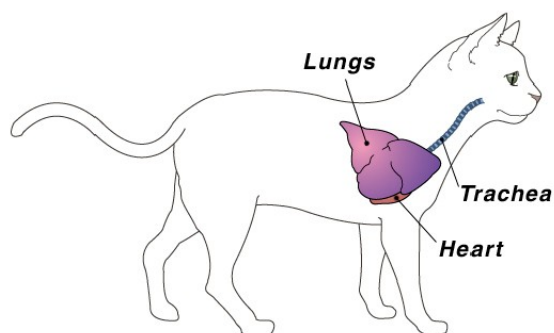
Author: Ernest Ward, DVM

### Do cats cough?

Cats do cough, but not as often as other animals. Retching or gagging is often confused with a cough in cats. A cough is an expiratory effort producing a sudden, noisy expulsion of air from the lungs. It is usually stimulated by an irritation or inflammation of the mucous membrane lining the *trachea*, *bronchi* or *bronchioles* in an effort to expel some foreign material or accumulated inflammatory secretion. Severe bouts of coughing may end with a retch and even bringing up of stomach contents.

### What causes cats to cough?

"Coughing is rarely associated with heart disease in cats although it is a common clinical sign in dogs and humans."



In cats, coughing is most often a sign of an inflammatory problem affecting the lower respiratory tract, especially some form of *bronchitis*. This inflammation is often due to an infection, particularly with viruses such as Feline Viral Rhinotracheitis or bacteria such as *Bordetella*. Parasitic worms, especially heartworms, may be responsible in some cases. Allergies of various origins may also cause coughing. Cats can cough for a variety of other reasons, including the presence of foreign material (such as inhaled grass) within the airway, or irritation from inhaled liquids or gases. Chest tumors can occasionally cause coughing. Coughing is rarely

associated with heart disease in cats although it is a common clinical sign in dogs and humans.

Coughing may accompany upper respiratory tract disease when irritation or inflammation affects the larynx or trachea, or a disease in the nose that results in excessive secretions draining into the larynx and trachea, causing irritation and coughing.

### When does a coughing cat need veterinary attention?

It may be normal for a cat to cough occasionally. As long as the cat is maintaining good health and the cough is not productive (does not result in the production of phlegm or sputum), veterinary attention is not immediately indicated. However, if the cough persists for more than a few days, is severe, productive, or if the cat appears sick or is losing weight, you should consult your veterinarian.

## How is the cause of a cat's cough diagnosed?

Because coughing is often associated with other signs of respiratory infection, an extensive initial work up may not be required. However, if the cough is severe or if it has been present for some time, then further investigation may be needed. A thorough medical history documenting the onset of the problem and its progression, any changes in the cat's home environment, or any other signs of illness in the cat, will be important. The diagnostic work-up may include blood tests, laboratory cultures of a wash sample from the lower respiratory tract, endoscopic examination and radiography. The cat may require a sedative for some of these procedures.

## How will the cough be treated?

Treatment depends on the diagnosis and your cat's medical condition. Symptomatic treatment with decongestant medicines may be helpful in mild cases. In the diagnosis is infectious, either as a primary viral infection with secondary bacterial infection or a primary bacterial infection, antibiotics will likely provide rapid improvement. Antibiotics will usually be prescribed for at least two weeks, if not longer. It is important not stop the treatment once the cat seems better. Complete the medication as prescribed otherwise the infection may return and be more difficult to treat.

**"It is important not stop the treatment once the cat seems better."**



If the coughing is a more chronic problem that has been present for one to two months, there may be permanent damage to the mucous membrane surfaces in the lungs such that they are not capable of healing. In these cases, infections may be recurrent. Targeted supplements that improve mucous membrane repair or act as immune stimulants may be helpful. Anti-inflammatory drugs may be used to suppress inflammation, particularly if there is an allergic basis and the allergen cannot be found and removed from the cat's environment. In the case of certain types of cancer, chemotherapy may be an option.