TOWER BRIDGE HOSPITAL
LONDON

Tower Bridge Hospital London
97–99 Whitechapel Road, London E1 1DT
020 7916 0029 · Open Mon–Sat, 9am–7pm (closed Sundays until September)
towerbridgehospital.co.uk

PATIENT INFORMATION · URGENT CARE

Chest infection

how long the cough should last, and when to worry

Most chest infections are viral bronchitis: an irritating cough after a cold, sometimes with phlegm, that clears by itself. The cough routinely lasts three weeks, which is far longer than most people expect. Pneumonia is a different illness, and the difference is in how unwell you feel rather than how much you are coughing.

Call 999 or go to an emergency department if you

- are **struggling to breathe at rest**, or cannot complete a sentence
- have **blue or grey lips or fingertips**
- have **chest pain that is severe**, or worse on breathing in and accompanied by breathlessness
- are **coughing up blood**
- become **confused, drowsy, or difficult to rouse**
- have **cold, clammy or mottled skin**, a very fast heartbeat, or have not passed urine all day

These can indicate pneumonia or sepsis. Older people and those with heart or lung disease can be seriously unwell with fewer obvious signs — confusion alone may be the first sign. In an emergency call 999, or go to the Royal London Hospital Emergency Department, Whitechapel Road, London E1 1FR.

How long a cough lasts

3 weeks
typical duration of a post-infection cough

Day 3–5
usually the worst of feeling unwell

Most
recover without antibiotics

Green or yellow phlegm is not a sign that antibiotics are needed. The colour comes from the body's own immune cells and appears in viral infections just as readily as bacterial ones.

Why antibiotics are often not prescribed

Acute bronchitis is usually viral. Trials consistently show antibiotics shorten the illness by around half a day at most, while causing diarrhoea, thrush and rashes, and driving antibiotic resistance. Not prescribing is an active clinical decision based on how you are, not an absence of one.

Antibiotics are appropriate when there are signs of pneumonia, when you are significantly unwell, or when you are in a higher-risk group. Sometimes a **delayed prescription** is the sensible middle path — you hold it and only start if things have not improved in a few days or if you worsen.

Looking after yourself

Helps

- Rest, and plenty of fluids to keep phlegm loose
- Paracetamol or ibuprofen for fever and aching
- Honey and lemon in warm water — as effective as most cough medicines (never honey under one year old)
- Propping yourself up at night with extra pillows
- Stopping smoking, which is the single biggest thing you can do for the cough

Not worth it

- Over-the-counter cough medicines — the evidence for them is very weak
- Cough suppressants in children under six
- Antibiotics left over from a previous illness
- Pushing on at work with a fever

If you are at higher risk

Contact us earlier rather than later if you have COPD, asthma, bronchiectasis, heart disease, diabetes, a weakened immune system, are pregnant, or are over 65. What is a nuisance for a healthy adult can be a serious illness in these groups, and the threshold for examining you and considering a chest X-ray is lower.

If you have a rescue pack of antibiotics and steroids for COPD, use it according to your agreed plan and let us know that you have.

Come back to us if

- you are **getting worse rather than better after three days**
- your fever persists beyond a few days, or returns after settling
- the cough is still there **after three weeks**
- you become breathless doing things that were easy before
- you cough up blood at any point, or have unexplained weight loss or night sweats

Reducing your chances next winter

The flu vaccine, COVID vaccine and pneumococcal vaccine all reduce the risk of serious chest infection. They are worth having if you are over 65, pregnant, or have a long-term heart, lung, liver, kidney or immune condition, or diabetes. Ask us which you are eligible for — we can give them here.

Book an appointment if you need your chest examined and oxygen levels checked, a chest X-ray, a sputum sample, or a sick note. We can assess you seven days a week and arrange X-ray quickly through our CQC-registered imaging partners.

Chest examined, X-ray arranged quickly

Same-day appointments most days, seven days a week, 9am–7pm, on Whitechapel Road.

Book an appointment

or call 020 7916 0029

Where to get help

Tower Bridge Hospital London
97–99 Whitechapel Road, London E1 1DT

020 7916 0029

WhatsApp **07903 284 189**
info@mhwclinic.co.uk
Open Mon–Sat, 9am–7pm (closed Sundays until September)

In an emergency
Call 999, or go to the Royal London Hospital Emergency Department, Whitechapel Road, London E1 1FR.

When we are closed and it is not an emergency
Call NHS 111 or visit 111.nhs.uk.

Related: **Urgent care** · **X-ray** · **Private GP** · **All patient leaflets**

Written and reviewed by Dr H Bolat, GP & Clinical Director **Review date: 26 July 2026** **Next review due: July 2028**

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This leaflet is based on current NHS and NICE guidance on acute cough, bronchitis and community-acquired pneumonia. It is general information and does not replace advice from a clinician who has assessed you. If your symptoms change or you are worried, contact us

on 020 7916 0029, call NHS 111, or call 999 in an emergency.