

Large print version



Dr Ian Watson

**Coughing
for 3 weeks?**

**Get out of
breath easily?**

**Do you have
either of these
symptoms?
Tell your doctor**

**BE CLEAR
ON CANCER**

NHS Be Clear on Cancer

Have you been coughing for 3 weeks or more?

Do you get out of breath doing things you used to be able to do?

Do you have either of these symptoms?

Tell your doctor

Let's be clear about these symptoms

A persistent cough

Everyone gets a cough now and then but a cough that doesn't go away could be a sign of lung cancer or other lung disease. If you've had a cough for three weeks or more, tell your doctor. It's probably nothing serious but if it is a lung disease, such as lung cancer or COPD (which stands for Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease), finding it early makes it more treatable.

Breathlessness

We all get short of breath sometimes, especially if we've done something energetic that we're not used to, like running up a hill. But if you get out of breath doing everyday things that you used to be able to do, like vacuuming or mowing the lawn, it could be a sign of lung disease or heart disease. Breathlessness can also be a symptom of other conditions such as anxiety or anaemia.

The good news is that the conditions that cause shortness of breath can often be treated. So it's important to see your doctor if your breathing is difficult or uncomfortable, or if it feels like you can't get enough air.

Let's be clear about lung disease

Lung disease covers a number of conditions including lung cancer and COPD. While smoking is the main cause of lung cancer and COPD, some cases are caused by fumes and air pollution. It's important to see your doctor if you have these symptoms, and not put them down to "a smoker's cough" or getting older. These diseases can be treated more effectively the earlier they are diagnosed.

Lung cancer

Lung cancer is one of the most common cancers in England, with around 36,500 new cases every year. It affects people of all ages but is most common in those over 50. Although lung cancer is more common in smokers, around one in eight people with lung cancer has never smoked.

COPD

COPD is the name for a group of lung diseases where people have difficulty breathing, often with frequent coughing. It includes chronic bronchitis and emphysema.

There are over a million people in England who have been diagnosed with COPD but there are many more that are living with the disease who haven't been diagnosed. This may be because they don't think their symptoms are serious and so don't get medical help.

Let's be clear about heart disease

Breathlessness can also be a sign of heart disease. There are around 1.8 million people in England with diagnosed coronary heart disease.

Causes of heart disease include smoking, high blood pressure and high cholesterol. The earlier it is diagnosed, the better – treatment can help manage the symptoms and reduce the chance of a heart attack.

Let's be clear about other symptoms

Diagnosing lung and heart disease early makes them more treatable. It's very important to see your doctor if you've had a cough for three weeks or more, or if you get out of breath doing things you used to be able to do. It may well be nothing serious but it could be a sign of something else that needs treatment.

You should also see your doctor if you have any of the symptoms that follow, as they can be signs of lung or heart disease as well.

- A cough that has got worse or changes
- Frequent chest infections
- Coughing up blood
- Chest or shoulder pain
- Wheezing
- Feeling more tired than usual for some time
- Losing weight for no obvious reason

Don't ignore your symptoms or put off a trip to the doctor. You won't be wasting anyone's time by getting them checked out.

And if you know anyone who has any of these symptoms, encourage them to see their doctor.

Let's be clear about your visit to the doctor

Your doctor will ask you some questions, such as how long have you had your symptoms and have they changed over time. Your doctor may also suggest some tests such as a chest x-ray, blood tests and lung function tests. These are all standard procedures and nothing to worry about.

It may help to write down your symptoms and how you feel, so that you don't forget anything on your visit.

You can find your doctor's contact details online at [nhs.uk/findgp](https://www.nhs.uk/findgp)

Let's be clear about how important it is to see your doctor

Ann Long, aged 80, Supporter of the Roy Castle Lung Cancer Foundation says:

“I would urge anybody with symptoms that might be lung cancer, like a persistent cough, to go and see their doctor straight away. I'm glad I did. I was diagnosed with lung cancer in 2003 and I can still do all the things I did before my treatment, like long walks, swimming and spending time with my family.”

Alan Cooley, aged 68, Supporter of the British Lung Foundation says:

“I was working on a building site and was starting to feel more and more out of breath as I went about my work. I was carrying less and less material around and found it hard to get anything done without pausing for breath. I didn't realise how bad it was and tried to hide it, but my family and workmates began to notice and persuaded me to visit my doctor. I was diagnosed with COPD and now I am receiving treatment for it, things are so much more manageable. I can finally walk reasonable distances again without pausing for breath!”

Let's be clear about how to help you stay healthy

A healthy lifestyle can help you feel better and reduce your risk of lung disease, heart disease and cancer. Some examples of what you can do to help you stay healthy are:

Stop smoking

If you smoke, the best thing you can do for your health is to quit. There's plenty of support available from the NHS. Visit [nhs.uk/smokefree](https://www.nhs.uk/smokefree), call **0300 123 1044** or textphone **0300 123 1014**.

Look after yourself

Try to maintain a healthy weight and keep active. Swimming, cycling, dancing, walking – the more you can do, the better. Try to eat a healthy, balanced diet too, with plenty of fruit and vegetables.

Cut down on alcohol

Drinking too much alcohol can lead to a number of health problems. By drinking less, you'll reduce your health risks.

More information

For more information and support on healthy living, visit [nhs.uk/oneyou](https://www.nhs.uk/oneyou)

Unclear on anything?

Then visit **nhs.uk/beclearoncancer**

This leaflet is available in this and other formats from the website or from Public Health England – please email **enquiries@phe.gov.uk**

nhs.uk/beclearoncancer

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