

Cochrane Corner

Over-the-counter medications are probably not effective for acute cough

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The problem

Patients with acute upper respiratory tract infections are frequently bothered by a cough. If they have no lower respiratory tract signs and do not look sick it is tempting to discuss the issue of over-the-counter medications.

Clinical bottom line

There is a lack of consistent evidence about over-the-counter medications for acute cough. Rather than spend moderate amounts of money on such treatments it is probably better to advise that acute coughs 'can take a long time' to go away. I often advise that if it has not gone away in a couple of months, and they are not getting worse, they should be seen again and an X-ray considered.

Over-the-counter medications for acute cough

	Success	Evidence	Harms
Over-the-counter medications for acute cough	Not effective	Cochrane review ¹ This review contains 25 trials involving 3492 participants.	Nothing major in medical terms. Cost to low income families is an issue.

References

1. Smith SM et al. Over-the-counter medications for acute cough in children and adults in ambulatory settings. Cochrane Review 2007, Issue 4. Art No: CD001831. DOI: 10.1002/14651858. CD001831.pub3.

All people residing in New Zealand have access to the Cochrane Library via the Ministry website www.moh.govt.nz/cochranelibrary

The parachute and the healthy cohort effect

'One of the major weaknesses of observational data is the possibility of bias, including selection bias and reporting bias, which can be obviated largely by using randomised controlled trials. The relevance to parachute use is that individuals jumping from aircraft without the help of a parachute are likely to have a high prevalence of pre-existing psychiatric morbidity. Individuals who use parachutes are likely to have less psychiatric morbidity and may also differ in key demographic factors, such as income and cigarette use. It follows, therefore, that the apparent protective effect of parachutes may be merely an example of the "healthy cohort" effect. Observational studies typically use multivariate analytical approaches, using maximum likelihood based modelling methods to try to adjust estimates of relative risk for these biases. Distasteful as these statistical adjustments are for the cognoscenti of evidence based medicine, no such analyses exist for assessing the presumed effects of the parachute.'

Smith GCS, Pell JP. Parachute use to prevent death and major trauma related to gravitational challenge: systematic review of randomised controlled trials. *BMJ* 2003; 327: 1459-61.