

Cough Medicine: Expectorants Versus Cough Suppressants

Expectorants and some cough suppressants can be purchased over-the-counter without a prescription. But with so many options on the shelves, how do you know which cough medicine to buy? Knowing the difference between expectorants and cough suppressants may help you decide.

Expectorants

Expectorants thin the mucus blocking the air tubes leading to your lungs. This makes it easier for you to cough it up (*expectorate*).

In these situations, you don't want to suppress (or stop) the coughing. You want to cough because it will clear the mucus from your lungs. Expectorants might help you cough more mucus out with each cough, so you cough less. That reduces irritation in your throat and lungs.

Cough medicine often contains an ingredient called **guaifenesin**. It is classified as an expectorant, though there's some debate about how well it does this.

The FDA says these medicines **may or may not work**. They are very safe, which is why you can get them without a prescription. But, there are few studies that show they help clear mucus.

Drinking lots of water is the easiest way to thin excess mucus in your lungs. If you're dehydrated, your mucus gets thicker and stickier. [Exercise](#) also helps get the mucus out.

Cough suppressants

Cough suppressants help stop your urge to cough. If you have a dry, hacking cough, a suppressant can help you feel more comfortable and get a better night's sleep. But, if your cough sounds wet and produces mucus, avoid using a suppressant.

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Dextromethorphan is the most common over-the-counter cough suppressant. Some cough medicines using dextromethorphan have other ingredients that may cancel out the cough suppression effects, like guaifenesin. Strong non-productive coughs need a stronger cough suppression that contains narcotic medications like codeine. These medications have other side effects that limit use, including drowsiness and dehydration.

Some cough suppressants contain alcohol. Follow the instructions on the label carefully to avoid overuse. And remember, drinking water may reduce the irritation from a dry, hacking cough.

How to choose a cough medicine

If you are considering buying an expectorant or cough suppressant, ask your health care practitioner which one might be right for you. Don't be surprised if they tell you to keep your money in your pocket!

For more in-depth information on this topic, please visit the [Big Fat Reference Guide \(BFRG\)](#). If you are enrolled in AlphaNet's Subscriber Portal, you can access the BFRG [here](#).