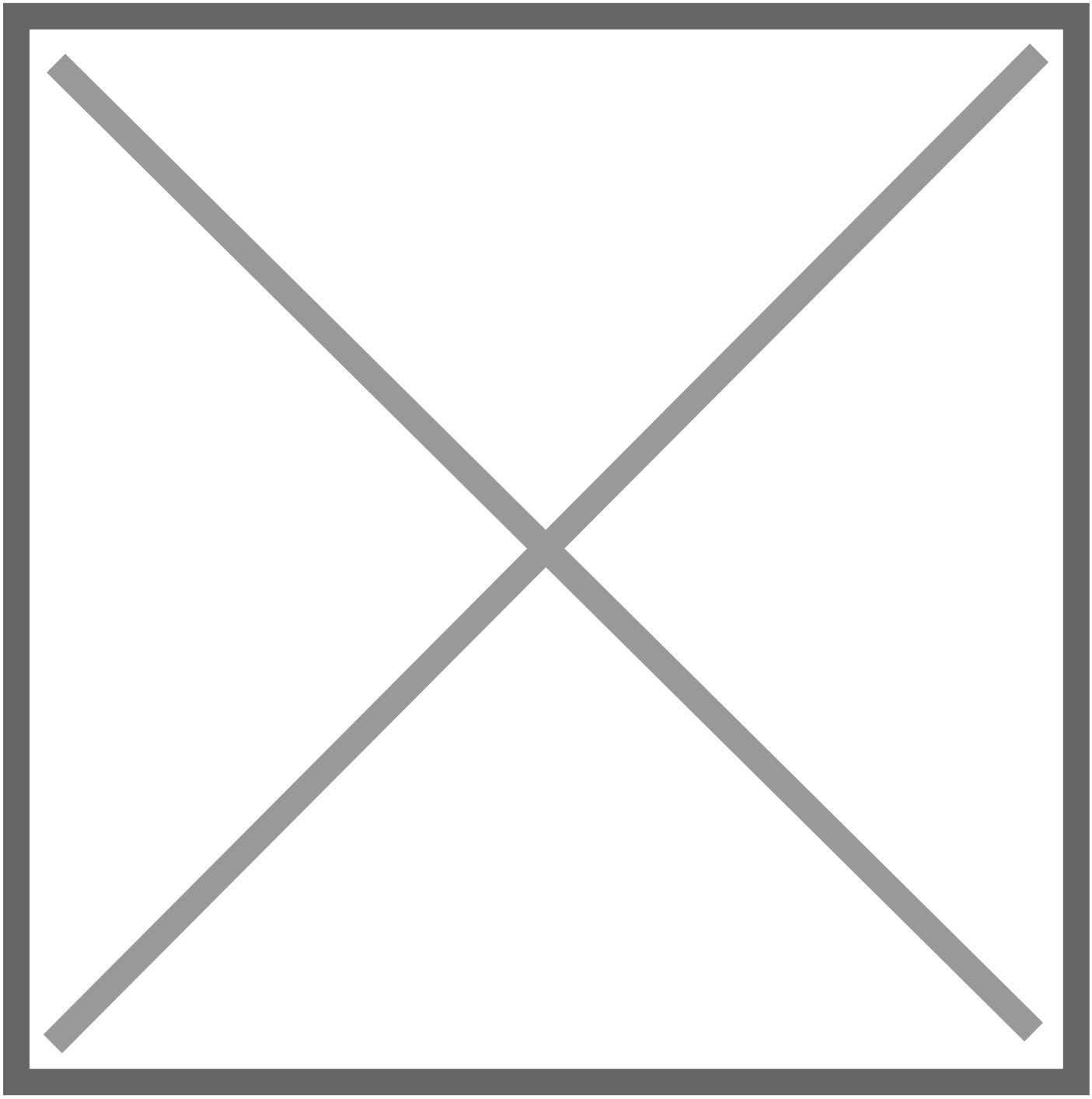
Pfizer Logo

Bodily Functions Explained: The Cough

Monday, February 20, 2017



It’s an everyday occurrence. A little tickle in your throat, a wayward speck of pollen, perhaps — or a bit of water traveling down the wrong pipe — and then a full-on chain reaction in your body.

Your torso lurches forward with force as your esophagus slams shut then opens wide again. In between, your lungs compress in a short burst and abdominal and rib muscles contract to push the equivalent of most of a two-liter bottle’s worth of air out of your windpipe in a fraction of a second. A cough has been born.

During a cold, a cough is the body’s way of clearing excess mucous from the throat. Infections, smoke, cold air, allergies and even acid reflux can trigger bouts of coughing as well.

Under normal conditions, the air expelled in a cough travels roughly at the speed of sound. But at its most powerful, a cough can travel at velocities of up to 500 miles an hour — carrying enough force to break a rib.

—*Johnna Rizzo*

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