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# Children's Health: Asthma

## *Overview and tips for parents*

Unless your child has classic asthma symptoms, like coughing, wheezing and trouble breathing, you might not know that he or she has asthma. Fortunately, childhood asthma is treatable. With the right medications and action plan, a child with asthma can enjoy normal activities with few disruptions.

### **Risk Factors**

Both genetic and environmental factors can increase your child's chances of having asthma. Children with a family history of asthma are at a greater risk of developing the disease. Other environmental factors that may increase your child's chances of developing asthma include:

- Previous allergic reactions (stuffy nose or skin rash) to environmental allergens
- Exposure to tobacco smoke
- Living in a large urban area with increased exposure to environmental air pollutants
- Family history of asthma, allergic rhinitis (hay fever), hives or eczema
- Low birth weight

- Obesity

### **Signs & Symptoms**

The most common signs and symptoms of childhood asthma are:

- Coughing
- Wheezing
- Shortness of breath
- Chest congestion
- Chest tightness

Additional signs and symptoms of asthma in infants include:

- A rattling cough
- Recurrent bronchitis with croup, bronchiolitis or pneumonia

Your child may only experience one sign or symptom. Because symptoms of asthma can be related to other disorders or illnesses, your doctor will consider the frequency of the symptoms along with other factors before making a diagnosis.

### **Triggers**

The most common asthma triggers for children include:

- Irritants – Tobacco smoke, exercise, weather changes, cold air and environmental pollutants
- Allergens – Dust mites, pet dander, pollen and mold

- Virus/Illness – Upper respiratory infections, rhinitis, sinusitis and gastro esophageal reflux disease (GERD)

### **Diagnosis**

If you suspect your child may have asthma, it is important that he or she be evaluated by a doctor as soon as possible. Make an appointment if you notice:

- Constant or intermittent coughing
- Coughing associated with physical activity
- Wheezing or whistling sounds when exhaling
- Shortness of breath or rapid breathing, which may or may not be associated with exercise
- Complaints of chest tightness
- Repeated respiratory infections – pneumonia, bronchitis, etc.



- Complaints such as "My chest feels funny" or "I'm always coughing"
- Coughing during sleep or that wakes the child during sleep
- Coughing/wheezing that accompanies crying, laughing, yelling or strong emotional reactions and stress.

### Treatment

While asthma can never be completely cured it can be successfully controlled. Well-controlled asthma means that your child has:

- Minimal or no symptoms
- Few or no attacks
- No limitations on physical activities or exercise
- Minimal use of fast-acting inhalers
- Few or no side effects from medications

Treating asthma involves both preventing asthma symptoms and treating an asthma attack in progress.

- *Preventive medications* reduce the inflammation in your child's airways that can lead to symptoms.
- *"Relief" medications* quickly open airways that are swollen and limiting breathing.

### Prevention

Careful planning and steering clear of asthma triggers are the best ways to prevent asthma attacks.

- **Avoid triggers.** As much as possible, avoid the allergens and irritants that your child's doctor has identified as asthma triggers.

- **Ban smoking around your child.** Exposure to tobacco smoke during infancy is a strong risk factor for childhood asthma and attacks.
- **Encourage your child to be active.** As long as your child's asthma is controlled, regular physical activity conditions the lungs to work more efficiently.
- **Have a plan.** Work with your child's doctor to develop an asthma action plan, and make sure all of your child's caregivers — child care providers, teachers, coaches, and the parents of your child's friends — have a copy.
- **Use a peak flow meter.** This tool can detect decreases in lung function before your child feels any symptoms, giving you important information on how to treat his or her asthma from day to day.

### Coping Skills

It can be stressful to manage a chronic condition like asthma in your child. Keep these tips in mind to make life as normal as possible:

- **Encourage normal play and activity.** Don't limit your child's activities out of fear of an attack. Work with your doctor until you are confident that the asthma is under control.
- **Make treatment a regular part of life.** If your child has to take daily medication, don't make a big deal out of it; it should be as routine as eating breakfast or brushing teeth.
- **Be calm and in control when facing asthma symptoms.** Don't get rattled if you see asthma symptoms

progressing. Focus on the asthma action plan and involve your child in each step so that he or she understands what's happening.

### Emergency Care

Even if a child hasn't been diagnosed with asthma, seek medical attention immediately if he or she has any trouble breathing. A severe asthma attack is a medical emergency. Seek emergency care if the child is:

- Breathing so hard he or she has to stop mid-sentence to catch their breath
- Using the abdominal muscles to breathe
- Widening the nostrils when inhaling
- Laboring hard to breathe (abdomen is sucked under the ribs during inhalation)

### Safety at School

- Make sure your child's school is aware of and understands your child's condition. Thoroughly explain medications and side effects, triggers and behavior regarding the condition.
- When only minor asthma symptoms are present, parents can send their child to school as long as normal daily activities can be performed. The child must be able to take medication at school, and parents should be easily reachable in case of an emergency.

## Did You Know...?

Childhood asthma has become more widespread in recent decades. As the most common chronic illness in children, childhood asthma causes more missed school and places more limits on activity than any other disease.