

# Recognizing Asthma in Your Young Child

Developed by the American Pharmacists Association. Improving medication use. Advancing patient care.

## Making Sure You Can Both Breathe Easy

A cough at night. A cold that doesn't go away. A whistling sound when breathing out. Maybe even a late-night trip to the hospital because that breathing didn't seem quite right.

If you've had any of this happen with your young child, you may be worried and wondering what's going on. It could be your child has asthma, a serious and sometimes dangerous disease. The good news is that asthma can be controlled and your child can live a normal and active life.

This brochure explains what you can do if you think your child might have asthma.

## What are the signs of asthma in young children?

Most children with asthma have symptoms before age 5. But it's sometimes hard for parents, and even doctors, to recognize asthma symptoms in very young children. Infants, toddlers and preschoolers have small and narrow airways in their lungs. Head and chest colds and other illnesses can inflame the lung airways, making them even smaller and more irritated. If this happens a lot, your child may have asthma.

The symptoms of asthma can range from a nagging cough that lingers for days or weeks to sudden and frightening breathing emergencies. Common asthma symptoms include:

- Coughing, especially at night
- Wheezing or whistling sound, especially when breathing out
- Trouble breathing or fast breathing that causes the skin around the ribs or neck to pull in tightly
- Frequent colds that settle in the chest

Your child might have only one of these symptoms, or most of them. You may think it's just a cold or bronchitis. But, if the symptoms keep coming back, that's a clue that your child might have asthma.

The symptoms also might get worse when your child is around "asthma triggers."

## What triggers asthma in infants, toddlers and preschoolers?

Asthma triggers are things that don't bother most people but can make inflamed lungs even worse for a child with asthma. One of the most common triggers for very young children is the common cold. Other asthma triggers include:

- smoke
- allergies to things such as pets, dust mites and plants
- strong smells (perfumes or other odors)
- changes in weather or cold air
- running or playing hard
- crying or laughing

If your child has asthma, your doctor will help you find out which triggers make symptoms worse. The first step to controlling symptoms is to stay away from the things that make your child cough or wheeze.

## How do I find out if my child has asthma?

Asthma is diagnosed with a medical exam and a test that measures the airflow entering and leaving the lungs. But children under 5 or 6 can't easily take the lung test because they have to blow very hard into a tube. Also, infants and toddlers can't talk about how they feel, so you need to watch for symptoms and describe them to your child's doctor.

Tell the doctor if anyone in your family has asthma or allergies, such as hay fever, hives or eczema, a disease that can make the skin red, blotchy and itchy. If so, it's more likely that your child has asthma.

To help learn your child's risk for asthma, the doctor may perform an allergy test. This can be done at any age.

Your doctor also may prescribe one or more asthma medicines. If your child gets better while taking the medicine, it can be a signal that your child's symptoms are due to asthma.



## Is there a kind of doctor that specializes in asthma?

An allergist is a doctor with special training and experience to diagnose and treat allergic diseases such as asthma.

## What are the dangers of not diagnosing and treating asthma in young children?

Asthma symptoms can appear to be mild or severe, but any asthma symptom is always serious. Even mild symptoms can quickly become life-threatening.

Poorly controlled and undiagnosed asthma can cause trips to the emergency room and hospital stays, missed work days for parents and suffering that little ones cannot express.

One danger is failure to recognize asthma early — calling it “just reactive airway disease” or saying that the child is an “early wheezer.”

## Can my child outgrow asthma?

No. A child with asthma is always at risk for having symptoms. Some people think children outgrow asthma because many have fewer symptoms or attacks during their teens. About a third of children with asthma still have symptoms when they become adults.

## How is asthma treated in young children?

Your child’s treatment will depend on how severe the symptoms are and how often they occur. The doctor may prescribe two types of medicines:

- Quick-relief — Any child who has asthma needs a quick-relief medicine to treat the noisy part of the disease — the coughing, wheezing and shortness of breath that occur with symptoms or an asthma attack. The medicine should be with the child at all times for use at the first sign of symptoms.
- Long-term control — This type of medicine is needed by some children to treat the quiet part of asthma — the inflammation of the airways. It is taken daily to prevent asthma symptoms and attacks.

Your child can take both medicines using an inhaler with a device called a holding chamber, or through a machine called a nebulizer that delivers the medicine through a mask. Your child’s doctor, nurse or pharmacist can teach you how to use both so you can determine what works best.

## Are asthma medicines safe for young children?

Asthma medicines are very safe and effective when used as directed.

Some studies have suggested that continued use of long-term control medicines can slightly slow a child’s growth, but being able to breathe outweighs this risk.

As with any medicine prescribed for your child, talk with your child’s doctor or pharmacist about your questions or worries.

## What should I do if I think my child has asthma?

If you think your child might have asthma, talk to your child’s doctor or to an allergist. An allergist can help you make an Asthma Action Plan so that you know when your child’s asthma is under control, when you need to change medicines, and when emergency help is needed. An Asthma Action Plan should have goals for your child’s asthma treatment and health. Children with asthma also should get a flu shot each fall.

With the right treatment, your child can sleep through the night, avoid missing time from day care or preschool, and breathe easy.

For more information or to find an allergist in your community, visit [www.acaai.org](http://www.acaai.org). Additional information also is available from the Allergy and Asthma Network Mothers of Asthmatics [www.aanma.org](http://www.aanma.org) and the Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America [www.aafa.org](http://www.aafa.org).