

# Patient Update

## Recognizing the signs of pediatric asthma

Do you ever notice what sounds like a whistle when your child exhales? Does he or she seem to tire easily when playing with friends? Does your child have a persistent cough? You wonder—could this be asthma? While asthma is a term often heard, it is frequently misunderstood.

Asthma is the most common chronic disorder in children and adolescents. It affects approximately 9 million children under the age of 18, including an estimated 1.3 million children under the age of 5. Approximately 50%-80% of children affected with asthma develop symptoms before they are 5 years old.

Children with asthma cough, wheeze, and experience chest tightness and shortness of breath. However, a chronic cough may be the only symptom of asthma, and a child does not have to wheeze to have asthma. Children with reactive airway disease, recurrent bronchitis or wheezy bronchitis probably have asthma.

Asthma can be a tricky disease to pinpoint for a number of reasons. There are other respiratory ailments with overlapping symptoms, and some children seem symptom free for long periods of time but then experience intermittent asthma exacerbations, or “attacks.”

The following key symptoms may mean you should seek the advice of an allergist/immunologist. These include:

- Coughing, either constant or just intermittent. Not all children who have the disease exhibit symptoms each and every day.
- Wheezing or whistling sounds audible when your child exhales.
- Shortness of breath, chest tightness or rapid breathing that may or may not be associated with exercise.

Other symptoms of asthma can include:

- Fatigue. Your child may slow down, stop playing or become easily irritated.



- A young child may say his or her chest “hurts” or “feels funny.”
- Infants may have problems feeding and may grunt during suckling.
- Older children may avoid activities such as sports or sleepovers.
- A child may have problems sleeping because of nighttime coughing or difficulty breathing.

### Who develops asthma?

While there are no clear markers to predict who will develop asthma and who won't, studies have shown that factors associated with the onset of asthma symptoms in children include:

- Infants and young children who wheeze with viral upper respiratory infections.
- Allergies. The relationship between asthma and allergies is very strong. If your child has allergies, be on the alert for potential signs of childhood asthma.
- A family history of asthma and/or allergy.
- Prenatal exposure to tobacco smoke and allergens.

No two children have exactly the same asthma symptoms or outcomes. It is a very individualized disease. Watch and listen for clues or symptoms to tell if your child might have asthma.

If you suspect your child has asthma, have him/her tested by an allergist/immunologist. Children who receive appropriate treatment and practice careful avoidance measures can participate in regular activities.

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