

# Childhood Asthma

## What is asthma?

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Asthma is a life-long breathing problem, and almost 5 million children have asthma. It is caused by swelling and closing of the airways and can make it hard to breathe. You cannot see airways because they are inside the body, connected to the lungs. If your child has asthma and it's not treated, it could limit the activities your child can participate in, as well as his or her ability to feel well and be alert in school.

Because asthma affects your child's ability to breathe, it's a serious condition. It can even cause death. That's why asthma needs to be treated by a doctor, and why you need to carefully follow the doctor's instructions.

## How can I tell if my child has asthma?

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By watching and listening for clues or symptoms you can tell if your child might have asthma. Another word for clues is **symptoms**. Asthma symptoms include:

- Coughing
- Wheezing (a whistling sound heard when your child breathes in or out)
- Shortness of breath
- Chest pains or tightness

Young children might point to their chests and say, "I hurt" or "I fell funny here." Babies cannot say anything at all. That's why it is important to take your baby to the doctor for well-baby visits. Your doctor can tell if your baby has asthma.

If you think your child might have asthma, take him to the doctor.

## My child's asthma symptoms come and go. Why?

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Some things make asthma symptoms worse. These are called **triggers**, because they "trigger" symptoms. Common triggers are:

- Animal fur or dander (tiny skin flakes and saliva) all animals with fur, even short fur, have this
- Pollen from leaves or weeds
- Mold
- Cockroaches
- Cigarette smoke
- Household dust

A cold or the flu also can trigger asthma symptoms. Cold air and exercise can, too. (Exercise and playing outside are good for your child, but he/she might need medicine before exercising.)

When your child is near his/her triggers, symptoms can get worse. Staying away from, or getting rid of the triggers will help. Your doctor can help you figure out how to get rid of asthma triggers.

Even when your child feels good, it's very important to follow the directions from your doctor, especially when it comes to taking medicine. The medicine can help to keep your child healthy, and keep airways from getting tight.

### **How can the doctor tell if my child has asthma?**

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- Asking questions about your child's health
- Finding out how much air your child's lungs can hold

### **If my child has asthma, how will the doctor and I help?**

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If your child has asthma, the doctor will give you prescriptions for medicine. Your child may need one medicine. Or, he/she may need more than one. Be sure you understand which medicines your child should take, and how often. If you don't understand the directions, ask the doctor or nurse.

### **What is an asthma attack?**

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Any time your child has asthma symptoms, it is an attack. Some attacks end quickly. Others are serious.

An attack is bad if:

- The child has trouble breathing, walking, or talking
- Lips or fingernails turn blue or gray
- These symptoms get worse even after taking medication

### **What can I do to help my child?**

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- Work with the doctor to make sure your child has the right medicine, and make sure your child takes the medicine and follows directions.
- Decrease the triggers in your home, like dust, smoking and cockroaches, that make your child's asthma worse.
- Make sure your school knows about your child's asthma. They should have a plan on file to help your child if he/she has an asthma attack. Your doctor will help you create this plan. If your child is old enough, he/she should carry his asthma medication with him/her in case symptoms get bad.

Asthma is a serious condition, but by working with your doctor and by trying to get rid of the triggers that make your child's asthma worse, you are helping your child to be healthier.

Your doctor can answer any other questions you have about asthma.