Asthma Symptoms to Watch For in Children

by ANGLEA FINLAY

Does My Child Have Asthma?

Asthma may be a common condition, but it’s not a disease to be taken lightly — especially when it affects children. In fact, the 9 million or so children in the U.S. who struggle with asthma are at an even greater health risk than asthmatic adults, since their airways are smaller and prone to more complications when the inflammation sets in.

Inflammation and irritation in the airways are the hallmarks of asthma, but the resulting discomforts take different forms. Unfortunately, more children are misdiagnosed because their symptoms may mimic other conditions, or don’t seem to fit into the classic asthma description.

Get familiar with the common symptoms of asthma in childhood, and understand why it’s important to act quickly when problems arise.

Most Common Symptoms of Childhood Asthma

Asthma is generally associated with breathlessness, and that’s true for every age group. However, younger asthmatics may not show the same set of symptoms as older people with asthma, which can complicate diagnosis, and even lead to an emergency.

Symptoms typically show up before age five, and while some of the most common signs of childhood asthma are predictable, others may surprise you. These are the top signs to watch for:

- Chronic cough
- Periods of rapid breathing
- Coughing fits when laughing or crying
- Shortness of breath or very shallow breathing
- Less energy and frequent fatigue
- General weakness, especially during any exertion
- Tight neck and chest muscles
- Chest pain or ache
- Whistling sound when breathing

Asthma symptoms often set in or get worse early in the morning or at night, but a lot will depend on what sort of allergen, irritant, or reaction triggers the asthma episode.

For instance, if a child is sensitive to certain foods or plants, you can expect to see symptoms following a meal, or after playing outdoors. The two most common triggers are external allergens and cold viruses.

Kids with asthma may not get sick more often than others, but when they do, the cold or flu tends to gather in the chest.

Difficulty breathing, excessive mucus, and pain across the chest are common, and it can be easy to simply attribute them to a nasty chest infection rather than explore more deeply. Recurrent bronchitis is another symptom of childhood asthma.

The Difficulty With Diagnosis

Since there can be multiple causes behind asthma attacks, it can be tricky to diagnose asthma in childhood. While an allergist or immunologist is trained to decipher the symptoms and find the source, certain obstacles can make for a longer road to diagnosis.

Wheezing Is Common in Childhood

Wheezing — that troubling sound of air whistling through the airways — is a major symptom of an asthma flare, but it's also fairly common in childhood. In fact, wheezing usually doesn't point to asthma in young children; viral respiratory infections are prime causes of wheezing in babies and toddlers.

Early Respiratory Symptoms Can Become Chronic

Children who have bouts of wheezing and other breathing trouble early on in life may continue to struggle with those symptoms at intervals through childhood and beyond. They could become sensitive to other asthma triggers, and although it can appear as though asthma is to blame, irritation or allergies are just as often the source of the problem.

No Single Diagnostic Test

There's no simple blood test or breathing test to confirm whether or not a child suffers from asthma. Instead, when a doctor suspects asthma, they will monitor changes in lung function and the child's response to treatment. If things get better, the asthma diagnosis is generally confirmed.

The more information you can provide to the doctor, the more they have to work with when considering a diagnosis. If you suspect asthma, be sure to keep a close eye on signs, and a detailed record of symptoms to relay to your child's medical team. Try to include things like:

- Family history of asthma and respiratory problems
- Surrounding environment (the plants, pets, pollen, and pollution around where you live)
- Symptom descriptions and patterns
- What seems to help calm the symptoms
- When the problems began

Very young children and infants demand even closer attention during the diagnostic process, because the source needs to be correctly identified in order to choose the appropriate therapy (and avoid potentially dangerous treatments).

When Symptoms May Point to Something Else

When asthma is suspected, your doctor may want to perform a series of tests, including pulmonary function testing (to measure airflow into and out of the lungs), blood tests to check for inflammation, and chest X-rays. In some cases, other tests may be used to rule out less common — but just as serious — disorders that could be causing the asthma-like symptoms.

Other respiratory illnesses that can masquerade as asthma, especially in very young children, include bronchitis and pneumonia: these bring along a severe cough and the characteristic wheeze, along with other general discomforts.

Less often, serious conditions like cystic fibrosis or congestive heart failure may be responsible for the breathing

difficulties, and since these demand swift diagnosis and close attention, your doctor should perform a very close examination.

Controlling Childhood Asthma

Inhaled medications are the first line of defense against asthma attacks and complications — you should know how and when to administer any inhaler that your child's doctor has prescribed.

If your child is old enough to manage their own health, take the time to discuss their asthma with them in detail, including going over the asthma action plan that you compiled with the doctor. The better any asthma sufferer knows what to expect and how to handle the situation, the better their chances of staying safe, healthy, and active.