

Diagnosing Asthma in Young Children

Most children who have asthma develop their first symptoms before 5 years of age. However, asthma in young children (aged 0 to 5 years) can be hard to diagnose. Sometimes it can be difficult to tell whether a child has asthma or another childhood condition because the symptoms of both conditions can be similar.

Also, many young children who have wheezing episodes when they get colds or respiratory infections do not go on to have asthma after they're 6 years old. These symptoms may be due to the fact that infants have smaller airways that can narrow even further when they get a cold or respiratory infection. The airways grow as a child grows older, so wheezing no longer occurs when the child gets a cold.

A young child who has frequent wheezing with colds or respiratory infections is more likely to have asthma if:

- One or both parents have asthma
- The child has signs of allergies, including the allergic skin condition eczema
- The child has allergic reactions to pollens or other airborne allergens
- The child wheezes even when he or she doesn't have a cold or other infection
- A child exposed to secondhand smoke can be a cause in the development asthma and the child will experience more frequent and more severe asthma attacks

A lung function test along with a medical history and physical exam is the most certain way to diagnose asthma. However, this test is hard to do in children younger than 5 years. Thus, doctors must rely on children's medical histories, signs and symptoms, and physical exams to make a diagnosis. Doctors also may use a 4 to 6 week trial of asthma medicines to see how well a child responds.