

Coughing and wheezing in children

Coughing and wheezing are common symptoms of childhood illness. They do not usually mean your child has a serious condition, although they can sound awful and may be distressing for you and your baby. Coughing is a normal, healthy and important reflex that helps clear the airways in the throat and chest.

In most cases, you can relieve the symptoms of coughing and wheezing at home. However, your baby may need urgent medical attention if the symptoms become more serious. A child can stop breathing during a severe respiratory attack. If your baby becomes distressed or their symptoms don't settle, take them to your doctor or children's hospital straight away.

If your baby suddenly starts to cough without being unwell first, check that they are not choking. This requires immediate emergency treatment.

Smoking in the home or car increases the risk of respiratory problems in babies.

Causes of coughing and wheezing

There are different reasons why your child may cough or wheeze. Possible causes include:

- **Colds and other viruses** – this is a very common cause of coughing.
- **Choking** – the coughing is sudden and the child has not been unwell.
- **Croup** – this tends to cause a barking, hoarse cough.
- **Bronchiolitis** – this is a chest infection, which can cause coughing and wheezing.
- **Smoke** – smoking around babies can cause them to cough and should be avoided.
- **Hay fever** – this may be caused by dust mites, animal hair or moulds. As well as coughs, other symptoms may include sneezing and a runny nose.
- **Allergy** – this can cause coughing after exposure to specific substances.
- **Asthma** – coughing tends to be worse at night or after exercise. The child may also wheeze.
- **Whooping cough** – a contagious infection, which can be prevented by immunisation.
- **Pneumonia** – this causes a sudden onset of cough, high fever and fast breathing: it can be prevented by immunisation.

Cough and wheezing are usually not asthma

Cough and wheezing are common when young children have colds and chest infections. It usually does not mean they have asthma. It is often difficult to tell whether very young children have asthma, as they have narrower airways and tend to get a lot of colds.

Most doctors do not diagnose asthma in babies until after 12 months of age, once the muscles around the airways in the lungs have matured. Sometimes, they may prescribe asthma medication before the baby is 12 months old, to see if the symptoms respond to that treatment.

When to seek immediate medical help

Children can stop breathing during a severe respiratory attack. If the coughing and wheezing don't settle, or if your baby becomes more distressed or unwell, take them to your doctor or children's hospital straight away.

Seek immediate medical help in these situations:

- **Breathing problems** – if your child is having difficulty breathing or their breathing becomes rapid or irregular
- **Breathing is noisy** – if your baby’s breathing is noisy when they are not crying
- **Skin colour changes** – if their skin turns blue or they become very pale
- **Tired** – if they seem unusually tired
- **Choking** – if your baby suddenly starts to cough and has not been unwell, they may be choking. They may have breathed something into their airways. Choking requires immediate emergency treatment
- **Something stuck in the nose** – a child with a one-sided runny or blocked nose may have something stuck in their nose and should be seen by a doctor
- **Refuses food or drink** – this should always be a cause for concern
- **Fever** – if they have a temperature over 37°C.

Non-urgent treatment for coughing and wheezing

Generally, you can relieve mild coughing and wheezing at home. Usually, the coughing will clear up in a few days to a couple of weeks. If coughing goes on for three weeks, see your doctor.

Home care suggestions include:

- **Comfort your child** – try to keep your baby calm. Having a cough and a noisy wheeze frightens children and breathing is more difficult when they are upset.
- **Offer frequent drinks** – drinking less amounts, but more often, may be easier if they are blocked up from a cold.
- **Avoid smoking** – smoking in the home or car increases the risk of respiratory problems in babies.

Medicines such as antibiotics don’t help viral infections such as colds, flu, bronchiolitis or croup. ‘Over-the-counter’ cough medicines are not suitable for infants and young children without specific advice from your child’s doctor, as there is evidence that they may cause harm to some children and mask symptoms of more serious illness.

Where to get help

- In an emergency, call triple zero (000)
- Emergency department of your nearest hospital
- NURSE-ON-CALL Tel. 1300 606 024 – for expert health information and advice (24 hours, 7 days)
- Maternal and Child Health Line Tel. 132 229 (24 hours)
- Asthma Victoria Helpline Tel. 1800 645 130 or (03) 9326 7088
- Your doctor
- Your local community health centre

Things to remember

- Coughing and wheezing in babies can be distressing for you and your baby, but in most cases, symptoms can be relieved at home.
- Seek medical advice if symptoms are persistent or you are worried about your baby.
- Smoking in the home or car increases the risk of respiratory problems in babies.

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Better Health Channel

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