

Asthma in kids: Early signs to look out for

They may experience a stubborn cough and breathing difficulties at night, says paediatrician Ong Eng Keow



Triggers like dust or colds can worsen asthma, so keep your child's surroundings clean to reduce flare-ups. PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

It can be worrying when your child struggles to breathe or has a persistent cough that never seems to go away. While sniffles and wheezing are common when the little ones catch colds, recurring breathing difficulties could be a sign of asthma – one of the most common chronic conditions in children.

Asthma can show up in different ways, from mild, occasional wheezing to more serious attacks that make everyday activities harder. The good news is, with early diagnosis, treatment and support at home, most children with asthma can run, play and grow up healthy and active, says Dr Ong Eng Keow, paediatrician at Mount Alvernia Hospital.

Here, he explains how to spot the signs, reduce triggers and respond when your child needs help.

Q How can I tell if my child's cough or wheeze is an asthma symptom?

Asthma can be tricky to diagnose in children under two, who often wheeze due to simple colds or viral infections. Even so, if you notice repeated coughing or wheezing – especially at night or after midnight – and your child tends to get breathless or cough a lot after playing, laughing or crying, it is worth talking to your doctor.

It also helps to look for patterns. Children with asthma often find it difficult to breathe near dust, pets, cold air or smoke. A cough that lingers for more than 10 days and returns with each infection is another telltale sign. Keeping a simple diary of your child's symptoms – when they happen, what triggers them and how long they last – can also help the doctor make a clearer diagnosis.

Children born premature or who have a family history of asthma and allergies may be more prone to developing it. Some children may grow out of asthma, especially if it stays mild. For others, it may go away at some point during childhood and return later when they are adults.

Q What asthma triggers should I watch for and how can I help my child avoid them?

Simple viral infections, such as the common cold, can easily inflame your child's airways and make wheezing worse. Dust mites in bedding and stuffed toys, pet fur, mould and pollen can also set off symptoms for some children. You can help by keeping your child's surroundings as clean and dust-free as possible – avoid carpets, heavy curtains and stuffed toys in their room, and wipe down surfaces to reduce allergens. Keep your home smoke-free and well-ventilated too.

Q How is asthma managed and what should I do when my child has an attack?

Ensure your child takes any prescribed medication daily, even when they feel well, to keep their airways calm and prevent sudden flare-ups. When they start to cough or wheeze, they may need a quick-relief inhaler to ease their breathing. Using a spacer with the inhaler helps the medicine reach the lungs properly. Keep their medicines topped up, and write a clear asthma plan for their school and caregivers, so everyone knows how to help your child if symptoms flare up.

If your child has an asthma attack, you should first stay calm as panic can worsen the symptoms. Help your child sit upright and administer the quick-relief inhaler as the doctor has taught you.

If they still struggle to breathe, cannot speak in full sentences, or their lips or fingertips begin to turn blue, call 995 or take them to the nearest emergency department immediately.



Dr Ong Eng Keow
Paediatrician
International Child &
Adolescent Clinic
Medical Centre D #08-56/57
Mount Alvernia Hospital