

Asthma: Part1 What is it?
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As a parent, you may have recently been told that your child has asthma or are concerned about your child's frequent cough. Could it indicate that your child has asthma? What exactly is asthma? Asthma is a chronic inflammatory disease of the lungs and airways. There is also an unresponsiveness in the airways. This means something that would not ordinarily cause a cough or a mild cough in someone who does not have asthma can cause significant coughing and/or wheezing in a child with asthma. Asthma is the most common serious childhood disease, affecting over 6.5 million children in the U.S. It is also the third most frequent cause of hospitalization in children under the age of 15. For these reasons, it is important to be able to recognize if your child's cough is something more than a frequent cold.

Asthma can be particularly hard to diagnosis in younger children. Cough is often the only symptom. However, cough and wheezing can be frequently caused by other factors such as a viral respiratory illness. Gastronomic refluxing can also be a common cause of coughing. Children with asthma will typically have a frequent cough that is worsened by triggers such as upper respiratory infections, exercise activity, significant changes in temperatures, and allergies. There is also typically a family history of asthma, and allergies or eczema. In older children, typically above age five, pulmonary function tests can be used to aide in the diagnosis.

The fundamental causes are not completely understood. However, genetic predisposition as well as exposure to environmental inhaled particles that may provoke an allergic response or airway irritation can cause asthma and related symptoms to develop. These environmental factors include second hand smoke exposure (even if the smoker smokes outside!), indoor allergens such as dust mites and pet dander, and outdoor allergens such as pollen and air pollution. Premature birth of less than 36-week gestation has also been associated with increased risk of developing asthma.

Children with milder asthmatic symptoms and those who only cough and/ or wheeze when sick with colds or other upper respiratory illnesses will typically outgrow this tendency over time. In general, however, asthma is considered to be a life-long condition, although the severity and frequency of symptoms may change over time. Treating asthma is critically important in helping your child limit its impact on your child's life and health. Next month we will discuss the different treatment options currently available.