

Asthma-like symptoms in babies

Coughing and wheezing in babies can be confused with asthma, as the symptoms are often the same. There are a number of other lung conditions that can affect babies under 12 months of age. The most common of these is bronchiolitis.

Bronchiolitis

Bronchiolitis is a viral infection that affects the small breathing tubes in the lungs. This virus is common in babies, particularly those under six months of age. Bronchiolitis often starts off like a cold, which then leads to coughing and wheezing. Although these symptoms are the same as asthma, bronchiolitis is a different condition. Because the airways in young babies are immature and floppy, they do not constrict as they would in a child with asthma.

Recommended treatment

Bronchiolitis is best treated like any other viral infection. Ensure that the baby:

- Rests as much as possible
- Drinks fluids regularly.
- Baby Panadol can be given if required.

When to seek medical help

Bronchiolitis can make babies sick for three to five days, but the cough can last for weeks. You should seek medical advice if you are worried or if the baby:

- Is breathing rapidly and/or irregularly
- Refuses food and drink
- Seems tired, pale and sweaty, and is very irritable.

If the baby turns blue, you should dial triple zero (000) to call an ambulance.

Risk factors for developing asthma

Wheezing or bronchiolitis in babies does not mean that a baby will progress to more persistent symptoms and develop asthma in childhood. The risk factors for developing childhood asthma include:

- Wheeze developing in late infancy
- Family history of allergy
- Exposure to cigarette smoke before or after birth.

Breastfeeding can reduce the risk

Australian research suggests that breastfeeding a newborn baby for up to four months can significantly reduce the risk of your baby developing childhood asthma.

Diagnosing asthma

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, though, they may prescribe asthma medication before the baby is 12 months of age, to see if the symptoms respond to that treatment.

Where to get help

- In an emergency, dial triple zero (000) to call an ambulance
- Your doctor
- Your local community health centre
- The Asthma Foundation of Victoria Helpline Tel. 1800 645 130 or (03) 9326 7088
- Maternal and Child Health nurse

Things to remember

- Coughing and wheezing in babies is usually the result of a viral infection such as bronchiolitis.
- Having bronchiolitis or another lung condition as a baby does not indicate that the baby will develop asthma as a child.
- Seek medical advice if symptoms are persistent or you are worried about your baby.

Want to know more?

Go to [More information](#) for support groups, related links and references.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

Asthma Foundation of Victoria

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