Diagnosing Asthma in Children Under 5

Asthma is a lifelong illness that affects the lungs and airways. People with asthma have sensitive airways that swell and narrow when exposed to triggers. Some common triggers are pollen, dust mites, pets, smoke, pollution, and exercise. While there is no cure for the disease, asthma can be well-controlled with proper medication and education.

Diagnosing asthma in children younger than 5 can be difficult. Often, asthma-like symptoms, such as wheezing and coughing, occur when a child has another illness, such as a viral infection. It is important to be aware of asthma symptoms and to share information with your health care provider in order to get the right diagnosis and treatment for your child.

What are the most common symptoms of asthma?
Each child’s asthma signs are different, but common symptoms are:
- trouble breathing
- slow feeding or a shortness of breath during an infant’s feeding
- wheezing
- coughing, especially at night
- rapid heart rate
- a decreased desire to run and play
- recurring bronchitis
- trouble getting over colds

If your child exhibits any of the above symptoms, talk to your health care provider.

How is asthma in children under 5 diagnosed?
It can be hard to diagnose asthma in young children because many respiratory illnesses share similar symptoms, and children generally are not able to take a lung-function test called spirometry. Your health care provider often relies on the information you provide and that they can see, including:
- family medical history
- allergies
- eczema (dry patches of skin)
- unusually swollen belly
- low birth-weight

Your health care provider may also administer a test to check levels of exhaled nitric oxide gas. If levels are high, airways may be inflamed, which can be a sign of asthma.

What should I do if my child is diagnosed with asthma?
If your child is diagnosed with asthma, with your health care provider, create an Asthma Action Plan. The plan outlines the steps that should be taken to prevent and handle an asthma episode, and it can be a life-saving tool.