

# Physical Signs of an Asthma Attack

Brought to you by:



AMERICAN RESPIRATORY ALLIANCE  
of WESTERN PENNSYLVANIA

*We're All About Breathing®*

800-220-1990

[www.healthylungs.org](http://www.healthylungs.org)

Cranberry Professional Park  
201 Smith Drive, Suite E  
Cranberry Twp., PA 16066



A Program of the  
American Respiratory Alliance  
of Western Pennsylvania

**What are the different breathing patterns associated with a mild, moderate, or severe asthma attack? If you pick up on early symptoms of an attack, you may be able to control the attack before it worsens. Treatment can be more effective if it is not delayed.**

## **INHALATION / EXPIRATION RATIO**

When breathing normally, a person breathes in twice as long as breathing out. So during an asthma attack, it will take longer for the child to breathe out.

**Mild** – Very little difference between breathing in and out.

**Moderate** – Breathing in equals breathing out.

**Severe** – Breathing out takes **longer** than breathing in.

## **WHEEZING – CONSTRICTED AIRWAYS**

Air flow through constricted bronchial tubes may cause a “whistling” or “wheezing” sound.

**Mild** – You may hear wheezing at the end of the exhalation.

**Moderate** – Wheezing is present the entire time as the child exhales. Eventually the wheezing will be present during inhalations too.

**Severe** – Wheezing may be absent because the bronchial tubes are so constricted that they block off the air. The wheezing may become present as the child’s condition improves.

## **RETRACTION**

The skin under the rib cage area above the breastbone and the soft area over the collarbone pull in with inhalation.

**Mild** – Retractions are not present.

**Moderate** – Very mild retractions, if any at all, are noticed.

**Severe** – Retractions are a sign of a severe attack. Retractions should be reported. The school’s emergency plan should be initiated.

The information provided is general and may not always apply to a specific child’s situation. Refer to the Asthma Action Plan provided by the physician. Proceed accordingly.

## **Reference Sources:**

*Lung Sounds, A Practical Guide* (Second Edition). Mosby

*Children With Asthma: A Manual for Parents*, Dr. Thomas F. Plaut, Pedipress, Inc.