



Breathing Difficulty in Infants & Children

A guide for parents

Breathing issues in babies and children can be scary. This handout explains what to look for and when to seek medical care.

1. How to Check Your Child's Respiratory Rate.

Normal breathing rates vary by age. To measure:

1. Make sure your child is calm and not crying.
2. Watch the rise and fall of the chest or belly.
3. Count breaths for 30 seconds, then multiply by 2.

A rate faster than your child's age range—especially if paired with other symptoms—can indicate breathing difficulty.

Normal respiratory rates

Age	Usual breathing rate per minute
< 1 year	30-40 (no higher than 60)
1-2 years	25-35 (no higher than 40)
3-5 years	25-30 (no higher than 35)
5-12 years	20-25 (no higher than 30)
>12 years	12-20 (no higher than 20)

2. Retractions: What They Are & Where to Look

Retractions occur when a child must work harder to breathe, causing the skin to pull inward with each breath. Retractions are a sign of respiratory distress. See videos on next page.

Look for pulling in at:

- Neck: Above the collarbone (suprasternal)
- Collarbones: Just under the collarbones (supraclavicular)
- Ribs: Between the ribs (intercostal)
- Belly: Under the ribcage (subcostal)
- Lower chest: Under the breastbone (substernal)

3. Nasal Flaring

Nasal flaring looks like the nostrils repeatedly widening with each breath. This is especially common in infants and shows that a child is working harder to pull air in. See videos on next page.

4. Grunting: What It Is & Why It Matters

Grunting is a soft sound made at the end of exhaling. It often sounds like a small “ugh” or moan. Grunting can mean a child is trying to keep air in their lungs to improve oxygen levels and is a sign of significant breathing difficulty. See videos on next page.



5. Congestion vs. True Breathing Difficulty

Because this can be really difficult to determine, If you're worried, call for an appointment so we can help you understand what you are hearing/seeing. **While you're waiting, watch [Video 1](#) and [Video 2](#) which demonstrate the symptoms mentioned** (see QR codes at bottom).

Nasal congestion (common in infants) may cause:

- Noisy breathing
- Snorting
- Mouth breathing
- Improved breathing after suctioning or saline drops

True breathing difficulty may include:

- Retractions
- Fast breathing
- Nasal flaring
- Grunting
- Unable to eat/feed normally
- Persistent cough with visible effort
- Child appears tired, pale, or not alert

If symptoms do not improve with nasal suctioning, or if noisy breathing is accompanied by increased work of breathing, it should be evaluated urgently.

6. When to Seek Emergency Care

Call our office or seek emergency care if your child has:

- Retractions, fast breathing, or grunting
- Blue or gray lips/skin
- Very poor feeding
- Extreme sleepiness or difficulty waking
- Signs of dehydration (very few wet diapers, dry mouth)
- Breathing pauses
- Any symptom that worries you

7. Online resources demonstrating difficulty breathing



[How to assess
breathing](#)



[Signs of breathing
difficulty](#)



[Wheezing](#)