

# Common Indicators of Medical Child Abuse

Medical child abuse (also known as Munchausen syndrome by proxy, caregiver-fabricated illness in a child or factitious disorder by proxy) can be very difficult to diagnose. It is a rare form of abuse involving the persistent fabrication, falsification or induction of physical or mental illness in a child by an adult, leading to unnecessary and potentially harmful medical investigations and/or treatment. Common conditions and symptoms that caregivers create in instances of medical child abuse include failure to thrive, allergies, asthma, vomiting, diarrhea, seizures, and infections. Below are some indicators to help identify medical child abuse.

## Section One: Indicators in a Caregiver

- Mother is the abuser in 85% of cases
- Appears to need or thrive on attention from physicians or other medical professionals
- Seems devoted to child and insists that only they can accommodate the child's needs
- Is either directly involved in a profession related to healthcare or is very knowledgeable medically and has a familiarity with medical terminology
- Seeks another medical opinion when told that the child is healthy
- Persistent about borderline abnormal results with no medical validity or refutes the validity of normal results
- Does not express relief when told that the child is improving or a diagnosis is ruled out
- Insists on invasive or painful procedures and hospitalizations
- Publicly solicits sympathy, donations, or benefits because of the child's illness

## Section Two: Indicators in a Child

- Median age for victims is between 14 months and 2.7 years
- Boys and girls are victimized equally
- Unexplained fear of doctors or hospitals
- Believe the symptoms and diagnoses caregiver tells them
- Unhealthy attachment to caregiver
- Siblings that have died or also have unexplained illnesses

## Section Three: Indicators in Medical Care

- Inconsistent histories or symptoms from different sources
- Use of multiple medical facilities
- Excessive or inappropriate history of procedures, medications, tests, hospitalizations, surgeries
- Pattern of missed appointments or discharge of the child against medical advice
- Diagnosis does not match the objective findings
- Signs and symptoms only appear in the presence of one caregiver
- Signs or symptoms are strange or unusual and do not fit any disease or match test results
- Failure of illness to respond to its normal treatments or unusual intolerance to those treatments
- Symptoms that improve under medical care but get worse at home

Sources: Flaherty, Emalee G., Macmillan, Harriet L., Committee on Child Abuse and Neglect. "Caregiver-Fabricated Illness in a Child: A Manifestation of Child Maltreatment." *American Academy of Pediatrics* 132.3 (2013). Pietrangolo, Ann. "Munchausen Syndrome by Proxy." *Healthline* (2016). New, Michelle. "Munchausen by Proxy Syndrome." *KidsHealth* (2012).