

Croup

Croup is a common illness in young children which can cause narrowing of the upper airways in the throat. A high-pitched noise made when the child breathes in (known as stridor), and varying degrees of breathing difficulty can occur.

What causes croup?

Croup commonly occurs in the winter months and usually follows a viral infection that begins with a runny nose, cough or fever. Croup occurs when the infection causes swelling around the vocal cords (voice box) and trachea (airway).

Croup is most common in children 3 months to 5 years of age because infants and young children have considerably smaller airways.

What can happen?

Your child may develop the symptoms of a harsh, barking cough, hoarse voice and possibly stridor (noisy squeaky breathing). Your child may also develop a fever. These symptoms often develop in the evening or during the night, and can worsen if your child is upset.

Other signs that indicate worsening of the condition include sucking in of the skin (over the breastbone, in front of neck and in between the ribs), flaring of the nostrils, and restlessness. The barking cough may last a few days, and the noisy breathing may last one to two days.

What to do - care at home

Most cases of croup can be cared for at home.

If your child only has a barking cough and is relaxed, happy and not distressed (for example playing, eating and drinking as he or she usually does), home treatment may include:

- close observation
- staying inside a warm room
- support and reassurance
- pain relieving medications may help (e.g. paracetamol or ibuprofen – follow instructions on the bottle).

The virus causing croup can spread to others, so keep the child isolated while unwell, and maintain good hygiene.



When to seek medical attention

If your child develops any of the following you should take them to their local doctor or nearest emergency department for medical assessment:

- Difficulty breathing (faster or slower than normal, sucking in of skin - as mentioned above).
- Difficulty with feeding (less than half their usual amount).
- Becomes pale or blue or lethargic.

Croup is potentially very dangerous as it can get worse quickly. If your child has any of the above, seek urgent medical attention (you may need to call 000 for an ambulance).

Treatment

As croup is usually caused by a virus, antibiotics will not help. Small single doses of steroid medication (dexamethasone or prednisolone) reduce the swelling in your child's airway helping them to breathe easier. Relief from breathing symptoms can be seen within one hour of giving them this medicine.

Your child may still have symptoms of a viral illness for a few days after treatment with steroid medication.

Severe cases of croup may need additional medications and admission to hospital.

Will it re-occur?

Croup may re-occur with subsequent colds. Each episode should be treated as carefully as the first.

Your child's airway will become larger as they grow and as such, episodes of croup will usually become less frequent after they reach 6 years of age.

If you have any other concerns take your child to your local doctor or emergency department.



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