

Croup

Information for patients, parents and guardians

Croup is a common childhood illness that can cause a distinctive, bark-like cough. It can also cause difficulty breathing which can be frightening for both you and your child. This factsheet will tell you what to expect when your child has croup, what treatment can be given and when to seek further medical advice.

About croup

Croup can be caused by several viruses which affect the airways to the lungs (the bronchi), windpipe (trachea) and voice box (larynx), causing them to swell and become narrower. It usually affects babies and young children between the ages of one and three years old. Some children have croup two or more times in their childhood. It seems to affect more boys than girls and is most common during autumn and winter. As children become older their breathing tubes become firmer and wider, so croup is uncommon after the age of six.

Symptoms

Your child may have:

A cough – the cough is usually harsh and barking. This 'croupy cough' is due to inflammation and swelling of the vocal cords in the voice box (larynx).

Breathing symptoms – the infection causes inflammation of the inside lining of the breathing tube and there may also be some thick mucus.

These symptoms cause the breathing tubes to narrow which may cause noisy breathing (stridor). Breathing may become difficult if the narrowing becomes worse.

Other symptoms – these may include a runny nose, hoarseness and a sore throat. Croup may follow a cold but can also appear without any earlier illness. Children may also experience a high temperature (fever), general aches and pains and be off of their food.

The symptoms of croup appear worse at night. They usually peak after one to three days and then improve. A mild but irritating cough may persist for a further week or so.

Treating croup at home

- Stay calm in order to reassure your child – children with croup may become distressed and crying may make their symptoms worse.
- Sit your child upright on your lap if their breathing is noisy or difficult. Let them find the most comfortable position.
- Encourage your child to drink cool drinks regularly (little and often) to help soothe their throat and keep them hydrated.
- Give your child paracetamol or ibuprofen liquid, following the instructions on the bottle.
- If their temperature is high, dress them in cool, loose clothes (if any) and don't use anything warmer than a sheet to cover them in bed.
- Stay with your child, or check him or her regularly, as you need to know if the symptoms are getting worse.
- Some people find that taking their child for a stroll in the cool, fresh air helps to relieve their symptoms.

What not to do

- Do not put anything in your child's mouth to look at the throat, this may make symptoms worse.
- Give your child cough medicines. These will dry the mucus, making the airways even smaller.

You should call the doctor if your child:

- has a temperature above 39°C or looks ill or distressed
- seems to be finding breathing difficult (breathing is always noisy when a child has croup)
- is drooling or cannot swallow or feed easily
- has a sinking-in of the skin between and below the ribs, in the pit of the stomach or at the base of the throat when breathing in

If you are worried or unsure about a case of croup contact your GP or nearest healthcare provider.

When to seek urgent help

- If your child becomes more restless, is struggling to breathe or has poor colour, seek medical help immediately or call an ambulance.

What the doctor may do

After seeing your child, the doctor may suggest you continue to treat them at home. As croup is caused by a virus, antibiotics are not usually given. The doctor may decide to give steroid medicine to your child. This helps to reduce the swelling in the airway and makes breathing quieter and easier.

It may be necessary to admit your child to the hospital for observation and any further treatment required such as further steroids, treatment with a nebuliser (which allows your child to breathe medication as a mist) or oxygen in the more severe cases.

Going home

Your child can go home when their breathing difficulties have resolved. Your child may still cough for a few days. Croup can sometimes occur again with no long-lasting effects.

If you have any questions or concerns please contact

Paediatric assessment unit: 023 8120 3744 or your GP

If you need a translation of this document, an interpreter or a version in large print, Braille or on audio tape, please telephone **023 8120 4688** for help.

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