

 Leaflet: Croup

Croup

Croup is an infection of the larynx (voice box) and trachea (windpipe). These are the upper and lower parts of the breathing tube that connects the mouth to the top of the lungs. The usual cause is an infection with a virus germ. Several different viruses can cause croup.

What are the symptoms of croup?

- ◆ *Cough.* It is a harsh, barking cough. This characteristic 'croupy' cough is due to the vocal cords being inflamed and swollen.
- ◆ *Breathing symptoms.* The infection causes inflammation and swelling on the inside lining of the breathing tube. It also causes thick mucus to be produced. A combination of these can cause narrowing of the tube. Air being breathed in along the narrowed tube may cause a noisy breathing (stridor). If the narrowing becomes worse, breathing may become difficult.
- ◆ *Other symptoms.* A runny nose, hoarseness and sore throat may also occur. Croup may follow a cold but can also appear 'out of the blue'. Other cold or 'flu type symptoms are common such as fever, feeling unwell, being off food and general aches and pains.

Croup symptoms usually last 1-3 days. The symptoms are often worse at night. A typical pattern is for a child to have a croupy cough with cold like symptoms but be reasonably well during the day. However, the cough may become worse with breathing symptoms at night. Once improved, a mild but irritating cough in an otherwise well child may last a further week or so.

Who gets croup?

It is most common between the age of one and three years, but any child under six can develop croup. As children become older, their breathing tube becomes firmer and wider. An infection by a similar virus in an older child or adult may lead to a cough and laryngitis but is unlikely to cause breathing problems. Croup often occurs in epidemics in the winter. Boys are more commonly affected than girls. Some children have several bouts of croup in their early childhood.

How serious is croup?

Symptoms are usually mild but occasionally can become severe. It is a common condition and many children just get a croupy cough and cold symptoms but with little or no breathing problems. Some degree of noisy breathing (stridor) with some extra effort needed to breath may develop. One or two disturbed nights can be expected. Most children with croup will remain at home and will soon recover. The main concern is if severe narrowing of the breathing tube develops. If it becomes very narrow, breathing can become very difficult. About 1 in 10 children with croup are admitted to hospital for observation if this is suspected to be developing. Most will be discharged within 24 hours as the condition often quickly improves. A very small number will require help to breath for a short period whilst the infection and inflammation resolves.

What can you do?

- ◆ *Try to be calming and reassuring.* A small child may become distressed. Crying can make things worse. Sit the child upright on your lap if breathing is noisy or difficult.
- ◆ *Lower any fever.* When a child has a fever (high temperature), breathing is often faster and the child may appear more ill than when the fever is lowered. To lower a fever: 1) give paracetamol liquid (Calpol, Disprol etc); 2) remove all the child's clothing if the room is not cold. Give a child with a croupy cough some paracetamol at bedtime, even if their temperature is fine, to prevent fever developing during the night.

- ◆ *Give plenty of cool drinks* .
- ◆ *Steam* . Moist air is commonly advised to ease the breathing difficulties of croup. It is thought to work by loosening any thick mucus stuck in the narrowed breathing tube. The mucus can then be cleared more easily by the cough. It is difficult to prove how effective this treatment is but it appears to be helpful. You can do this by boiling a kettle in a small room and letting the room fill with the steam. Sitting for 15-30 minutes with the child upright on your lap in a steamy room may bring relief. NEVER leave a child on their own with hot water near and be very careful not to scald or burn the child.
- ◆ *Cool air* . Some people find that a stroll outdoors, carrying the child upright, in the cool fresh air not only cools any fever but helps with breathing.

It is often in the small hours of the morning that children with croup wake distressed. Sitting them upright on your lap, being reassuring, giving a cool drink, a dose of paracetamol and half an hour in a steamy room or a stroll in the cool air can often make a big difference.

Other treatments

- ◆ If breathing difficulties become worse, sometimes a steroid medicine is prescribed. Steroid medicines help to dampen down inflammation and may ease the symptoms. Often a single dose will ease symptoms within a few hours. This may be given at hospital if the child is felt to be ill enough to need hospital treatment. Sometimes a doctor may give a dose for the child to take at home and assess if there is any improvement a few hours later. Steroid medicines do not shorten the length of the illness but often reduce the severity of breathing symptoms.
- ◆ DO NOT give cough medicines that contain ingredients that can make a child drowsy. This will not help a child who may need extra effort to breath.
- ◆ Antibiotics are of no use as the infection is usually due to a virus.

When to seek medical help

Most children recover quickly. A small number of children will become worse and may need to go to hospital. The following gives some tips on when to seek further medical help.

- ◆ If the breathing becomes rapid or difficult. If the child needs to put a lot of effort into breathing or is struggling to breathe and becomes restless. (Breathing is often noisy in mild croup but it is *difficulty* in breathing which can be worrying).
- ◆ If the child is drooling or unable to swallow.
- ◆ If a high fever persists despite giving paracetamol and removing the child's clothes.
- ◆ If the child's colour is pale or bluish. (A normal colour for a child with mild croup would be pink or flushed. A change from this to pale or bluish would be worrying).

If you are concerned for any reason that a child is becoming worse, seek medical help immediately.

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