

CROUP

What is croup?

Croup is a viral infection of the vocal cords, voice box (larynx), and windpipe (trachea). Croup is usually part of a cold. Swelling of the vocal cords causes hoarseness. Stridor (see below) is caused by the opening between the vocal cords becoming more narrow.

Symptoms of croup include:

- A tight, low-pitched "barking" cough. Your child may sound almost like a seal when he or she coughs.
- A hoarse voice
- You may hear a harsh, raspy, vibrating sound when your child breathes in. This is called stridor. Stridor is usually present only with crying or coughing. As the disease becomes worse, stridor also occurs when your child is sleeping or relaxed. With severe croup, breathing may be difficult.

How long will it last?

Croup usually lasts for 5 to 6 days and generally gets worse at night. During this time, it can change from mild to severe and back many times. The worst symptoms are seen in children under 3 years of age.

How is it treated?

First Aid For Stridor:

If your child suddenly develops stridor or tight breathing, do the following:

Inhalation of warm mist: Warm moist air seems to work best to relax the vocal cords and break the stridor. The simplest way to provide this is to have your child breathe through a warm, wet washcloth placed loosely over his nose and mouth. Another good way, if you have a humidifier (not a hot vaporizer), is to fill it with warm water and have your child breathe deeply from the stream of humidity.

The foggy bathroom: In the meantime, have a hot shower running with the bathroom door closed. Once the room is all fogged up, take your child in there for at least 10 minutes. Try to help your child not be afraid by cuddling or reading a story.

Cold, dry air: If warm humid air doesn't work, some children respond to the opposite environment. If it is cold out, take your child outside for 20-30 minutes. Some children enjoy a ride in the car with the windows down. If it is not cold outside, try opening the freezer and sitting in front of it.

Most children settle down with the above treatments and then sleep peacefully through the night. If your child continues to have stridor, call your child's health care provider IMMEDIATELY. If your child turns blue, passes out, or stops breathing, call the rescue squad (911).

Home Care for a Croupy Cough (without stridor)

Humidifier: Dry air usually makes a cough worse. Keep the child's bedroom humidified. Use a humidifier if you have one. Run it 24 hours a day. Otherwise, hang wet sheets or towels in your child's room.

Warm fluids for coughing spasms: Coughing spasms are often due to sticky mucus caught on the vocal cords. Warm fluids may help relax the vocal cords and loosen up the mucus. Use clear fluids (ones you can see through) such as apple juice, lemonade, or herbal tea. Give warm fluids only to children over 4 months old.

If your child has a fever, you may give him acetaminophen (Tylenol) or ibuprofen (Advil/Motrin). (See our Fever information for further details.)

Close observation: While your child is croupy, sleep in the same room with him. Croup can be a dangerous disease.

Smoke exposure: Never let anyone smoke around your child. Smoke can make croup worse.

Contagiousness: The viruses that cause croup are quite contagious until the fever is gone or at least during the first 3 days of illness. Since spread of this infection can't be prevented, your child can return to school or child care once he feels better.

When should I call my child's health care provider?

Call IMMEDIATELY if:

Breathing becomes difficult (when your child is not coughing).

Your child starts drooling or spitting, or starts having great difficulty swallowing.

The warm mist fails to clear up the stridor in 20 minutes.

Your child starts acting very sick.

Call within 24 hours if:

The attacks of stridor occur more than 3 times.

A fever lasts more than 3 days.

Croup lasts more than 10 days.

You have other concerns or questions.

(Adapted from "Croup" by B.D. Schmitt, M.D., author of "Your Child's Health," Bantam Books)