

Health Facts

Emergency Department

Croup

What is croup?

Croup is a common illness in young children which can cause narrowing of the upper airways in the throat. A child with croup often has a hoarse voice, barking cough and noisy breathing. A high pitched noise made when the child breathes in, known as a 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 presents itself initially as a cold or runny nose. With this infection comes swelling around the vocal cords and partial obstruction of the windpipe. Croup is most common in children three months to three years of age because infants and young children have considerably narrower airways.

What can happen?

Your child may develop the symptoms of a harsh, barking cough and possibly noisy breathing. He/she may also develop a fever. These symptoms often develop and/or worsen in the evening and during the night and can worsen if your child is upset.

Other signs that indicate worsening of the condition include retraction or inward movement of the breastbone and lower ribs and restlessness and flaring of the nostrils when breathing in. The barking cough may last a few days and the noisy breathing may last one to two days.

What to do – Care at home

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

- Close observation
- Staying inside a warm room
- Support and reassurance
- If no improvement or if deterioration occurs, seek medical advice as your child will probably benefit from steroid medication

When to seek medical attention

If your child develops any of the following you should present to the nearest Emergency Department for medical assessment.

- Difficulty in breathing
- Retractions of the breastbone and ribs at rest
- Becomes pale

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Croup is potentially very dangerous as the airway may become completely obstructed. If you think your child is critically unwell call an ambulance.

Treatment

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

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 he/she grows and as such, episodes of croup will usually become less frequent after they reach three to four years of age.

If you have any other concerns take your child to the GP or Emergency Department.

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