

Croup

Croup is an inflammation of the voice box (larynx) and windpipe (trachea). It causes a barking cough and a high-pitched sound when breathing in. Although croup is sometimes associated with allergies, it usually is caused by a virus, most commonly the parainfluenza virus. The illness most often is “caught” from someone who is infected, sometimes from air droplets or from your child’s own hand, which he uses to transfer the virus into his nose or eyes.

Croup tends to occur in the fall and winter when your child is between three months and three years old. Initially he may develop nasal stuffiness resembling a cold, and he may have a fever. After a day or two, the sound of the cough will turn into something resembling barking. The cough tends to become worse at night.

The greatest danger with croup is that your child’s airway will continue to swell, further narrowing his windpipe and making it difficult, at times almost impossible, to breathe. As your child tires from the effort of breathing, he may stop eating and drinking. He also may become too fatigued to cough. Some children are particularly prone to getting a croup-like cough and seem to develop such a cough whenever they have a respiratory illness.

Treatment

If your child has mild croup symptoms, steam up the bathroom by turning on hot water in the shower, take her into the steamy bathroom, close the door, and sit in the bathroom with your child. Inhaling the warm, humidified air should ease her breathing within fifteen to twenty minutes. Or, weather permitting, you can take her outside to breathe in the cool, wet night air. While she is sleeping use a cold-water vaporizer or humidifier in your child’s room.

Do *not* try to open your child’s airway with your finger. Her breathing is being obstructed by swollen tissue beyond your reach, so you can’t clear it away. She may throw up because of the coughing, but don’t try to make her vomit. Pay close attention to your child’s breathing.

Take her to the nearest emergency room immediately if:

- She seems to be struggling to get a breath.
- She can’t speak because of a lack of breath.
- She gets excessively sleepy.
- She turns blue when she coughs.



Your pediatrician may prescribe various medications, usually steroids, to help decrease the swelling in the upper airway and throat and make it easier for her to breathe. Antibiotics are not helpful for croup because the problem is caused by a virus or an allergy. Cough syrups do not help, either. In fact, over-the-counter cough medicines don't work for children under age six and should not be given to children under two years of age as they may pose a health risk.

In the most serious cases, which are quite rare, your child will have a lot of difficulty breathing, and your pediatrician may admit her to the hospital for a few days until the swelling in the airway gets better.

Adapted from the American Academy of Pediatrics at www.healthychildren.org

