

## What is croup?

*Croup* is a common viral infection of the upper airway at the level of the throat, namely the voice box (larynx) and windpipe (trachea). It is a special problem in children, who normally have narrow air passages, and usually occurs from 6 months to 3 years of age but can occur up to 6 years or so. The younger the child, the more susceptible he or she is to croup. It tends to occur in the winter months.

## What are the symptoms?

A harsh, 'barking' cough and noisy breathing are the main symptoms. Croup usually begins as a normal cold, followed by a sore throat, hoarse voice and fever. The cough, which is dry, hollow sounding and 'barking', is very characteristic. A *stridor* (a high-pitched wheezing or grunting noise with breathing) may develop, and this is a serious sign.

Attacks of croup usually occur at night, causing the child to wake up with a fright and a harsh, brassy cough or stridor. The symptoms are worse if the child is upset and may last for 3 or 4 days, but the first 1 or 2 days are the worst.

## What is the danger?

Croup is usually a mild infection and settles nicely; however, in younger children it can sometimes cause complete airway obstruction, which is rapidly fatal. These children need to be in hospital to have specialised treatment and occasionally an airway tube inserted.

## What is the treatment?

### Humidified air

It is important to keep calm and keep the child calm by comforting them on your lap or wrapping them in a blanket (if it is cold) and carrying them outside, especially if the atmosphere is humid. The traditional method of using steam (danger of burns) and vaporisers is no longer favoured by most doctors. However, moist air does help.

### Treatment tips

- Give the child paracetamol for fever.
- Antibiotics will not help, because croup is caused by a viral infection; however, they are used for any bacterial infection that may develop with croup.

- Stay by the child's bedside until the child settles.
- Have the child propped up in bed or lying on a few pillows for support. Watching television can help the child relax.
- Wrapping the child in a blanket and walking around outside may help the symptoms to settle.

### Medication

The modern method is to give the child steroids (cortisone) by mouth or by spray for the more troublesome attacks where stridor is a feature.

## When should you seek immediate medical help?

Call your doctor or take your child to hospital urgently if:

- the stridor gets worse and is present when resting or sleeping
- the breathing becomes very difficult or noisier
- the child becomes blue and pale
- the breastbone of the chest sucks in on breathing
- the child is floppy and dribbling
- the child becomes very restless or irrational
- the child looks sick and you are most concerned.

### Key points

- Croup is worse at night.
- Keep the child calm.
- Moist air is helpful.
- Croup can be dangerous.
- Get help if you are concerned.

