

Caring for Your Child with Croup



Emergency Department

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Advice for Parents & Caregivers

What is croup?

- ▶ Croup is a viral infection that causes swelling of the windpipe near the voice box. Croup symptoms can be frightening for caregivers but the illness is rarely serious.
- ▶ Croup is a contagious illness that can be given to other people through sneezing and coughing, like a cold. It is more common in the fall and winter.
- ▶ Croup often happens in small children between the ages of 6 months and 4 years. Children eventually outgrow the tendency to develop croup symptoms. Older family members affected by the same virus usually only get sore throat, raspy voice and cold-like symptoms (cough, runny nose).

What are the symptoms of croup?

The symptoms of croup usually appear in the middle of the night and get better during the daytime. These symptoms usually last 2-5 days and in most children, are mild and disappear quite quickly.

- ▶ Your child's cough may sound like a barking dog. This sound is the result of swelling of your child's windpipe.
- ▶ Your child may have symptoms of a cold, like a low-grade fever, runny nose and a decrease in energy and appetite.
- ▶ Your child may have a raspy voice or cry. Your child may also make a whistling sound as he or she breathes in.

What can I do at home?

Croup can usually be treated at home.

- ▶ Stay calm and make your child comfortable. If your child senses you are frightened, he

or she may become anxious. This can make it even harder for your child to breathe.

- ▶ If your child has a fever or complains of a sore throat, you may give him or her acetaminophen (Tempra® or Tylenol®) or ibuprofen (Advil® or Motrin®).
- ▶ Do not give your child under the age of 6 any cough and cold medicines that are sold over-the-counter (without a prescription).
- ▶ Offer your child cold juice, popsicles or crushed ice drinks to help soothe his or her sore throat.
- ▶ Let your child breathe in cold air to help with "croupy sounds". If the weather is cool, make sure your child is dressed appropriately and go outside with him or her for 5 to 10 minutes. In warmer weather, you can open the freezer door and let him or her breathe in the cold air.
- ▶ Stay close to your child so you can **watch and listen to your child's breathing**:
 - If you hear a whistling sound, note if you hear it all the time even when your child is calm or only when he or she is upset/ crying. This whistling sound is called stridor.
 - Look at your child's chest wall when he or she is sleeping. Check to see if you can see your child's ribs appearing when he or she breathes in or if the notch above their breastplate is sucking in.
 - See if you can get your child to calm down or if he/she remains fussy and restless even when you try to soothe them.
 - Try to notice the color of your child's lip and face in a good light, checking for a bluish-grey color.

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How is croup diagnosed?

Doctors are usually able to recognize croup by the symptoms you describe. Blood tests or x-rays do not help with diagnosing of croup.



Bring your child to the Emergency department if:

- ▶ Your child makes a constant “whistling” sound OR his or her chest wall is “caving in” or “sucking in” as he/she breathes, especially when calm.
- ▶ You are unable to calm your child down and feel that he/she is unusually fussy or restless.

How is croup treated?

Croup is a viral infection. Antibiotics that are used to treat bacterial infections will not help.

Your child’s doctor may prescribe a syrup that is called dexamethasone. Dexamethasone is an oral corticosteroid. This medication will reduce the swelling in your child’s windpipe. Dexamethasone starts to work within 2 or 3 hours and lasts for a few days.



You should call 9-1-1 if:

- ▶ Your child’s face is bluish-grey for more than 5 to 10 seconds OR
- ▶ Your child becomes unusually sleepy and you have difficulty seeing their chest wall moving when he/she breathes OR
- ▶ Your child is struggling to breathe in and you are unable to calm them within a few minutes.

If your child has severe symptoms, ambulance paramedics may start some treatment right away, like oxygen if needed. It is safer to call 9-1-1 then to drive yourself to the hospital, especially if you are nervous and panicked.

If you bring your child to the hospital, here is what you can expect:

- ▶ Your child may need a breathing mask if he or she has stridor (whistling sound when your child breathes in). The medication your child is given in the mask is adrenaline, It is also called epinephrine. It very quickly reduces some of the swelling in your child’s windpipe. Its lasts only 1 to 2 hours. If your child receives a breathing mask, he or she will need to be observed in the Emergency Department for at least 2 hours.
- ▶ Children who are really sick with croup may also need oxygen by mask to increase the oxygen in their blood (oxygen saturation). An ear-nose and throat doctor (ENT) may also come to see your child if his or her breathing is really difficult. If this happens, the Emergency doctor will explain to you why these extra steps are needed.
- ▶ Very few children with croup need to stay in the hospital for more than a few hours of observation. Even children with the most severe symptoms who require hospital admission usually get completely better after a couple of days without any left over problems.

At BC Children’s Hospital, you are an important member of your child’s health care team. Please ask questions so you understand and can be part of decisions about your child’s care and treatment.



If you have any questions, please call 604-875-2345 local 7261.

It's good to ask!