

Croup

Symptoms of croup

Croup is much more likely to occur during the winter months. The initial symptoms of croup are very similar to those of a cold. If your child has croup they may have:

- A bark-like cough.
- A runny nose.
- A fever - a temperature of 38C (100.4F) or above.

Bark-like cough

Between 1-4 days after becoming infected, your child will develop a cough that sounds like a 'bark'. This is the characteristic sign of croup. When breathing in, it is also likely that your child will make a rasping sound. This is known as inspiratory stridor and will often be most noticeable when a child cries or coughs.

The bark-like cough tends to be worse during the night.

Croup is usually at its worst for 48 hours after the cough has started. After this time, you should start to see improvements. It is very common for a more 'regular' cough to remain for a few days after the condition has improved.

When to seek medical advice

If your child's croup symptoms get worse, you should seek immediate medical advice. You should call 999 to ask for an ambulance if your child's condition worsens in any of the ways listed below.

- Your child is struggling to breathe.
- Your child unusually sleepy.
- Your child becomes cyanosed (they have a blue tinge to their lips, or face).

Causes of croup

Croup is caused by a viral infection that is passed on from one child to another. It is possible for a child to get croup several times before their airway is large enough to be unaffected by the condition.

Diagnosing croup

Your GP will diagnose croup based on the sound of your child's cough, and the symptoms that they are experiencing around the same time as the cough, such as a hoarse voice, and difficulty breathing.

Your GP may also take your child's temperature to see if they have a fever, and ask whether your child has recently had a cold or a viral infection.

Your GP will want to rule-out any other conditions that may cause similar symptoms to croup.

Your GP will decide if hospital admission is needed, or whether your child's croup is safe to treat at home.

You should not try to check your child's throat because this can trigger a spasm of the airway. A spasm can cause even more swelling and obstruction to the airways, making breathing even more difficult.

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Treating croup

Most cases of croup do not need to be treated because the condition is usually self limiting (gets better on its own) and tends to only last for a short period of time. However, if croup affects your child's breathing, it can be an irritating and, occasionally, a distressing condition.

Comforting your child

If your child is distressed, sit them upright on your lap. It will also provide comfort and reassurance to the child by having you there. This is important because if your child is crying and distressed, it may make their symptoms worse.

A mild case of croup can be treated at home. If your child has a fever, painkillers, such as paracetamol, will help to lower their temperature. You should also make sure that you give your child plenty of fluids to ensure that they remain well hydrated.

Self-treatment

You should not give your child any medicine that may make them drowsy. Children often find it easier to breathe when they are alert.

While your child is sleeping, propping them up with pillows may make it easier for them to breathe.

If your child has croup, it is important that they avoid smoky places because smoke may irritate their airway. Do not smoke around your child, and keep a window open to circulate fresh air.

Cough medicines, short acting beta-agonists (as often used in inhalers to treat asthma), and decongestants are of no benefit to treating croup.

Liquid paracetamol

Painkillers, such as paracetamol and ibuprofen, are available in liquid form, making them ideal for young children. You can get liquid paracetamol over-the-counter (OTC) from pharmacies and from some supermarkets.

Children who are under 16 years of age should not be given aspirin.

Speak to your pharmacist if you are unsure about what type of painkiller is suitable for your child.

Complications of croup

Complications that develop from croup are unusual, but they can include the onset of a secondary infection, such as pneumonia.

Severe croup rarely blocks a child's airway completely. However, if this does happen, medical attention is needed immediately and the child may need to be put on a ventilator.

Preventing croup

To prevent the spread of infections, such as croup, you should teach your child to practice good personal hygiene from an early age. For example, they should wash their hands regularly, and always cough and sneeze into a tissue, before discarding it immediately.

Adapted from NHS choices.

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