

Croup - Advice Sheet

Advice for parents and carers



Croup is a common childhood illness that can cause a distinctive, bark-like cough. It can also cause difficulty breathing which can be frightening for both you and your child.

When should you worry?



RED

If your child has any of the following:

- Is going blue around the lips
- A harsh noise as they breath in ([stridor](#)) present all of the time (even when they are not upset)
- Has pauses in their breathing (apnoeas) or has an irregular breathing pattern
- Is too breathless to talk / eat or drink
- Becomes pale, mottled and feels abnormally cold to touch
- Becomes extremely agitated (crying inconsolably despite distraction), confused or very drowsy (difficult to wake)
- Develops a rash that does not disappear with pressure (the '[Glass Test](#)')
- under 3 months of age with a temperature of 38°C / 100.4°F or above (unless fever in the 48 hours following vaccinations and no other red or amber features)

You need urgent help.

Go to the nearest Hospital Emergency (A&E) Department or phone 999



AMBER

If your child has any of the following:

- Has laboured/rapid breathing or they are working hard to breath – drawing in of the muscles below their lower ribs, at their neck or between their ribs
- A harsh breath noise as they breath in ([stridor](#)) present only when they are upset
- Seems dehydrated (dry mouth, sunken eyes, no tears, drowsy or passing less urine than usual)
- Is becoming drowsy (excessively sleepy)
- Has difficulty swallowing saliva
- Is 3-6 months of age with a temperature of 39°C / 102.2°F or above (but fever is common in babies up to 2 days after they receive vaccinations)
- Seems to be getting worse or if you are worried
- Continues to have a fever of 38.0°C or above for more than 5 days

Please ring your GP surgery or contact NHS 111 - dial 111 or for children aged 5 years and above visit 111.nhs.uk



GREEN

- If none of the features in the red or amber boxes above are present

Self Care

Continue providing your child's care at home. If you are still concerned about your child, call NHS 111 – dial 111

What is croup?

Croup (also called laryngotracheobronchitis) can be caused by several viruses which affect the airways including the voice box (larynx), windpipe (trachea) and lungs (the bronchi) causing them to swell and become narrower. It usually affects babies and young children between the ages of 1-6 years old and gets better in 1-2 days'.

What are the symptoms of croup?

Your child may have:

- A cough – the cough is usually harsh and barking. This ‘croupy cough’ is due to inflammation and swelling of the vocal cords in the voice box (larynx).
- Noisy breathing symptoms – the inflammation can narrow the voice box (larynx) and windpipe (trachea) and cause an extra noise called a **stridor**. This noise is normally heard on breathing in.
- Breathing may become difficult if the narrowing becomes worse.
- Other symptoms – these may include a runny nose, hoarseness and a sore throat.
- Croup may follow a cold but can also appear without any earlier illness. Children may also experience a high temperature (fever), general aches and pains and be off of their food.
- The symptoms of croup appear worse at night. They usually peak after one to three days and then improve. A mild but irritating cough may persist for a further week or so.

How can I help my child?

- Stay calm in order to reassure your child – children with croup may become distressed and crying may make their symptoms worse.
- Sit your child upright on your lap if their breathing is noisy or difficult. Let them find the most comfortable position.
- Encourage your child to drink cool drinks regularly (little and often) to help soothe their throat and keep them hydrated.
- Give your child paracetamol or ibuprofen liquid, following the instructions on the bottle.
- If their temperature is high, dress them in cool, loose clothes (if any) and don’t use anything warmer than a sheet to cover them in bed.
- Stay with your child, or check him or her regularly, as you need to know if the symptoms are getting worse.
- Some people find that taking their child outside in the cool, fresh air helps to relieve their symptoms.
- It used to be thought that steam inhalation was helpful but there is no evidence to support this.
- Do not give cough syrup. It is not recommended for children under 6 years, can make children drowsier and shows no benefit in treating croup.

How is Croup treated?

- Your child may be given a steroid medicine called dexamethasone which can reduce airway swelling. As croup is caused by a viral illness, antibiotics are not needed.