

## CROUP

Croup, like many of the other illnesses that result in cough, runny nose and fever, is usually caused by a virus. There are several different viruses that can lead to the constellation of symptoms we refer to as croup. These viruses are most common in the winter and spring months, but can affect children at any time of the year.

For most people, croup starts out like most other common colds, with the runny nose, fever and cough; however, rather than staying in the nasal passages, the viruses that cause croup like to infect the area around the vocal cords and the trachea (wind-pipe). When this happens, the children may lose their voices and will often develop a characteristic barking cough that is frequently described as a seal bark. If this is as bad as the croup becomes for the kids, they are doing well. Unfortunately a certain percentage of children will have enough swelling in their airway to cause some difficulty breathing and some noisy breathing called stridor. Stridor is noisy breathing while taking a breath in, as opposed to wheezing which usually occurs when breathing out. Stridor tends to get worse with agitation, so a child who is calm and has stridor is in more trouble than a child who only has it while crying.

To go along with the stridor, children who are having trouble breathing will often develop retractions. Usually with croup and other problems that affect the upper airway, the retractions are seen just above the breastbone, and the observer is able to see the skin above the breastbone being pulled in with each breath. The deeper the retraction, the harder the child is working to breathe.

Not all episodes of croup are emergencies or even need medical treatment. Since croup is a viral illness, *antibiotics will not help your child get better faster*. If you suspect your child has croup, the mainstays of home care are keeping the nose clear (saline washes and bulb suctioning, or having older children blow their nose), running a humidifier or vaporizer to add humidity to the air, and if the child is still having trouble, taking her outside into the cool night air for 20 minutes. If you don't have a humidifier readily available, getting the bathroom steamy by running hot water in the shower can also help. Just hold your child in the steamy bathroom and keep her calm for several minutes by reading a story, singing to her, etc. If your child is over six months old, ibuprofen (Motrin, Advil) can also help, especially with discomfort and any fever.

These strategies will often help with the mild cases of stridor and retractions, but occasionally kids will get severe enough to need medical help. If you feel like your child is having trouble breathing, and especially if he is starting to turn blue around the lips, get medical help immediately. If she just has mild stridor, but doesn't seem distressed, it is usually good to call your physician, because there are prescription treatments that can help in the right circumstances. When in doubt, it is always best to call your provider for more specific advice and/or treatment.

Usually croup is worst at night. This makes it difficult for parents to know how to best care for their children, not knowing if they should try to make it through the night with the above home remedies or to

take the child to the emergency department. Again when in doubt, contact your medical provider by either calling the on call provider or going to the emergency department.

Croup usually peaks somewhere between the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> day of the cough, so if the first night was bad, you may want to visit your regular doctor to see if your child would benefit from a steroid to help control the inflammation that leads to the difficulty breathing. Keep in mind that things usually are worse during the night, so your child may be fairly happy when you bring her to the doctor, but we also understand the nature of croup.

Once the scary, barky cough of croup has run its course (usually 2-4 days as mentioned above), croup tends to act like your common cold. Kids will frequently continue with a runny nose and junky cough that will often persist for another 1-2 weeks. There should be no fever after the 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> day, and if it lasts longer, you should have your child seen by her doctor, as this may be a sign of a secondary infection like an ear infection or pneumonia that would benefit from antibiotic treatment.

The information contained on Dr. Tyson Horkley's website, including all of its linked pages, is provided for your general information only. It is not intended to replace medical advice offered by health care providers. If you have or suspect you have a medical problem, you should consult a healthcare provider.