

Information for Parents of Children with Croup

What Is Croup?

Kids with croup have a virus that makes their airways swell. They have a telltale "**barking**" cough (often compared to the sound of a seal's bark) and a raspy voice, and make a high-pitched, squeaky noise when they breathe.

Most kids with croup get better in a week or so.

What Are the Symptoms of Croup?

At first, a child may have cold symptoms, like a stuffy or runny nose and a fever. As the upper airways — the voice box (larynx) and windpipe (trachea)— become irritated and swollen, a child may become hoarse and have the barking cough.

If the airways continue to swell, breathing gets harder. Kids often make a high-pitched or squeaking noise while breathing in — this is called **stridor**. They also might breathe very fast or have **retractions** (when the skin between the ribs pulls in during breathing). In the most serious cases, a child may appear pale or have a bluish color around the mouth due to a lack of oxygen.

Symptoms of croup are often worse at night and when a child is upset or crying.

What Causes Croup?

The same viruses that cause the common cold also cause croup. Most often seen in the fall, croup can affect kids up to age 5.

There are two types of croup, **viral croup** and **spasmodic croup**, both of which cause the barking cough. Most cases of croup are viral.

How Is Croup Diagnosed?

Health care providers listen for the telltale cough and stridor. They'll also ask if a child has had any recent illnesses that caused a fever, runny nose, and congestion; and if the child has a history of croup or upper airway problems.

The doctor might order a neck X-ray if the croup is severe and slow to get better after treatment. In cases of croup, an X-ray usually will show the top of the airway narrowing to a point, which doctors call a "steeple sign."

How Is Croup Treated?

Most cases of croup are mild and can be treated at home. Try to keep your child calm, as crying can make croup worse.

For a fever, medicine (acetaminophen or, only for kids older than 6 months, ibuprofen) may make your child more comfortable. Ask your health care provider how much to give and follow the directions carefully.

Breathing in moist air can help kids feel better. To help your child breathe in moist air:

- Use a **cool-mist humidifier** or run a hot shower to create a **steam-filled bathroom** where you can sit with your child for 10 minutes. Breathing in the mist will sometimes stop the severe coughing.
- In cooler weather, taking your child outside for a few minutes to breathe in the cool air may ease symptoms. You also can try taking your child for a drive with the car windows slightly lowered.

Your child should drink plenty of fluids to prevent dehydration. If needed, give small amounts of liquid more often using a spoon or medicine dropper. Kids with croup also should get lots of rest.

Some kids need a breathing treatment that can be given in the hospital or a steroid medicine to reduce swelling in the airway. Rarely, kids with croup might need to stay in a hospital until they're breathing better.

When Should I Call My Health Care Provider?

Most kids recover from croup with no lasting problems. But some kids — especially those who were born prematurely, or have asthma or other lung diseases — can be at risk for complications from croup.

Call your doctor or get immediate medical care if your child:

- has trouble breathing, including very fast or labored breathing
- is too out of breath to talk or walk
- has pulling in of the neck and chest muscles when breathing
- has stridor that is getting worse
- is pale or bluish around the mouth
- is drooling or has trouble swallowing
- is very tired or sleepy or hard to awaken
- is dehydrated (signs include a dry or sticky mouth, few or no tears when crying, sunken eyes, thirst, peeing less)