Croup

Croup is a condition that involves inflammation and swelling of the larynx (voice box), trachea (windpipe) and bronchi (the large airways in the lungs). This inflammation of the air passages can cause your child to have a barking cough, a hoarse voice and noisy or laboured breathing.

Croup is common in children—one in every 50 to 100 children will get croup in their first year of life. Croup usually affects children between the ages of six months and five years and is more common in winter. Most instances of croup can be treated safely at home but some more severe cases may require hospital treatment.

What causes croup?

Croup is usually caused by a virus. The virus inflames the large air tubes and causes them to swell. The swelling and mucus partly blocks the air tubes making it harder for your child to breathe.

Sometimes croup is caused by changes in the environment (e.g. cold dry air). This is called 'spasmodic' croup. Children with asthma may be more prone to this sort of croup.

Other family members can catch the same virus but may only get symptoms of a cold or flu.

Signs and symptoms

- Often starts with one to two days of common cold symptoms (mild fevers and a runny nose).
- As the virus spreads lower it can cause:
  » a hoarse voice
  » barking cough (often sounds like a ‘seal bark’)
  » a noisy sound when your child breathes in
  » fast and laboured breathing
- Symptoms usually get worse at night and may disappear during the day.
- Your child may complain of a sore throat or not wish to eat or drink.
- Children with very severe croup may not be able to breathe enough air in and may ‘go blue’ or become drowsy and need urgent treatment in hospital.

Treating croup

Although children with croup usually get better within three to four days without treatment, we now have very effective treatment (oral steroid medicine) that can help your child get better within a few hours.

In severe croup, children may need to be given oxygen and may need a different medicine (adrenaline via mask) to help open up the airways while waiting for the other medicines to take effect.

Things you can do at home

- Keep your child calm—if your child becomes upset, his/her symptoms will get worse.
- Keep your child upright—sitting up may make breathing easier.
- Children’s paracetamol—if your child is very unsettled and has a high fever then paracetamol (in recommended doses) may help them feel better.
- No steam treatment or vaporisers—steamy rooms (such as bathrooms) and vaporisers do not help croup.

If your child continues to have difficulties breathing please take them to your local doctor or hospital immediately.

Contact us

Lady Cilento Children’s Hospital
501 Stanley Street, South Brisbane
t: 07 3068 1111 (hospital switchboard)

In an emergency, always contact 000 for immediate assistance.

www.childrens.health.qld.gov.au
www.facebook.com/childrenshealthqld

FS011 developed by Emergency Department. Updated: November 2014.
All information contained in this sheet has been supplied by qualified professionals as a guideline for care only. Seek medical advice, as appropriate, for concerns regarding your child’s health.