

## What is croup?

Croup is a common illness in children under three years of age. The main symptoms are barking cough and noisy breathing. These often last for a few days. Before the cough develops, the child may have a sore throat, temperature, red eyes, a runny nose, or be off their food. With a cough, the chest may be sucked in when the child breathes in. A “crowing” sound from the throat called stridor maybe heard. The voice is usually hoarse. The difficulty with breathing is worse when the child becomes upset. Croup is often worse at night.

## Why does it happen?

When we breathe, air passes through the voicebox (larynx) and windpipe (trachea) into the lungs. In croup, the voice box and windpipe become inflamed and narrowed because of swelling of the lining and increased mucus. This partial blockage causes the windpipe to narrow - like when you suck hard on a blocked straw. Young children have small, soft windpipes and so are most affected. The size and strength of the windpipe increases as children grow up which is why croup is less common in older children and adults.

## What causes the illness?

Most episodes of croup are due to viral infections.

## How long does it last?

Generally, croup is worse in the first few days of the illness although breathing difficulty and noisy breathing may last up to a week. The cough usually lasts longer. Once the illness settles, there is no long term damage to the chest.

## Treatment

Breathing in moist air (“steam treatment”) has often been advised, but there is no evidence to prove it helps the symptoms. The risk of burns from steam is more dangerous to your child than the croup itself so steam treatment is **not** recommended. Instead:

- Try to calm and comfort your child on your lap
- If the child’s croup gets worse and you are worried that it might be serious, contact your child’s doctor or go to the nearest emergency department for help
- Since viruses cause croup, antibiotics will **not** help
- Steroid medications reduce airway swelling quickly. They have been shown to be effective and are now routinely given to treat croup

## When to seek urgent help

If your child has any of the following, contact a doctor or go to hospital immediately:

- Your child’s breathing worries you
- Your child is drooling and having difficulty swallowing saliva
- You notice the chest being sucked in when your child breathes
- Your child becomes pale or blue, probably after a coughing spell
- Your child has a high temperature
- Your child becomes restless, irritable or confused
- You are worried for any other reason

*Looking after your child with*  
**CROUP**



Parent Factsheet  
Royal Hospital for Children  
Glasgow

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The medical information provided in this factsheet is for educational purposes only. This information should not be used as a substitute for the medical care and advice from your doctor. You should always contact your doctor if you are worried about your child's health. Your own doctor may recommend other treatments based on your child's individual circumstances.