

Parent/carer advice sheet

When your child has croup

Croup is an infection of the upper airway, usually caused by a virus, often the parainfluenza virus. It causes swelling of the larynx (voice box), trachea (windpipe) and bronchi (bronchial tubes). Croup is common between the age of six months and six years. Many children will have two or more episodes of croup in their childhood. The same virus can affect children over six years old but it is unlikely to cause croup, as their windpipe is wider and stronger.

Croup is self-limiting and symptoms usually resolve within 48 hours, although occasionally they may last for up to a week. Resolution of croup symptoms is usually followed by symptoms of upper respiratory tract infection.

What are the signs and symptoms?

Usually begins with cold-like symptoms e.g., temperature, runny nose and a cough. Croup symptoms start after a few days and include:

- Barking cough that sounds like a seal
- Noisy breathing (stridor) – rasping sound especially when breathing in
- Hoarse voice
- Sore throat
- Symptoms which are often worse at night

Do I need any tests to confirm the diagnosis? No. Croup is diagnosed by the information you give to the doctors and the barking cough.

What treatments are available?

Some children with croup will need a dose of steroid medicine. This medicine helps reduce the swelling in the airway, which reduces difficulty in breathing. The steroid does not reduce the length of illness. In more severe cases, children may also need a nebuliser of medicine (adrenaline), which quickly reduces swelling. Children who need this nebuliser must stay in hospital as the effects of this medicine only last a couple of hours.

What happens if my child does not get treatment?

Most children will get better without treatment in a few days. However, you should always see a doctor if your child:

- Has continuous noisy breathing when they are not upset
- Breathing symptoms worsen e.g., getting faster, requiring more effort – chest or neck muscles may pull in with each breath
- Is restless or agitated
- Looks unusually pale
- Has a constant fever lasting longer than five days.

Call an ambulance if your child:

- Is struggling to breathe
- Skin or lips look blue
- Is very sleepy, unusually quiet or still
- Is drooling and unable to swallow

Is there anything I can do to help my child?

- Stay calm and reassure your child as they may become upset and scared with croup. Crying can make your child's symptoms worse. Sit your child upright on your lap if their breathing is noisy or difficult.
- Encourage your child to drink fluids regularly.
- Reduce fever only if your child is distressed by it, e.g., with paracetamol or ibuprofen. You must carefully follow the instructions that come with the medicine.

What doesn't help?

- Antibiotics are not usually prescribed as croup is a viral illness and antibiotics do not kill viruses.
- Do not use cough medicines, particularly those that have ingredients that cause drowsiness.
- Do not use steam inhalation as there is little evidence that it helps and it can cause scalds.

Useful sources of information NHS conditions Croup - NHS (www.nhs.uk)

Please remember that this leaflet is intended as general information only. We aim to make the information as up to date and accurate as possible, but please note that it is subject to change. Please therefore always check specific advice on any concerns you may have with your doctor.

How can I help reduce healthcare associated infections?

Infection prevention and control is important to the well-being of our patients and for that reason we have infection prevention and control procedures in place. Keeping your hands clean is an effective way of preventing the spread of infections. Please follow our infection prevention and control guidelines when visiting our healthcare sites. Further information is available on our website.

Parent Advice Sheet

If you would like a copy of this information on audiotape, in large print or translated, please call the Patient Advice Liaison Service on 01296 316042 or email bht.pals@nhs.net

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