



Croup

WHAT IS CROUP?

Croup is a common childhood respiratory infection of the throat and upper chest, which causes a harsh, “barky” cough – like a dog or a seal barking. There is sometimes difficulty breathing, or noisy breathing (called “stridor”). That’s when we know it’s not just an ordinary cold, but croup. The croup season is generally October through March. Some children are prone to croup and can get it several times, but most kids just get it once, if at all.

WHAT CAUSES CROUP?

Like ordinary colds, croup is caused by a virus – usually the parainfluenza virus. This virus causes inflammation and swelling in the larynx (the vocal cord area) and trachea (the windpipe). That’s what leads to the cough and the difficulty breathing – and usually a sore throat and hoarseness, too.

HOW LONG DOES IT LAST?

Croup is usually mild, and lasts about a week. The first two or three days are the hardest part, especially at night. As croup goes on, the cough changes to a more “normal”, looser cough.

DO YOU NEED TO COME TO THE OFFICE WITH CROUP?

In general, yes. It is safest to be checked in our office. Sometimes we will prescribe a steroid – either a shot or an oral medicine (dexamethasone or prednisone), and symptoms will improve and a severe attack will be averted. Other times we might assess and determine that a steroid is not necessary. Since a virus, not a bacterium, causes croup antibiotics will not help.

TREATMENT AT HOME FOR CROUP

Only mild croup should be treated at home; more severe cases need to be seen in our office or the emergency room. Kids with mild croup can have mild stridor, especially when crying, but it is not bad enough to cause difficulty breathing.

Home Treatment:

- Use a cool-mist humidifier in the bedroom.
- Give plenty of fluids.
- Elevate the head of your child’s bed. An infant can even be placed in a car seat to be more upright; and an older child may use an extra pillow (no pillows for children under one year).
- A steamy bathroom can also help relieve a croup “attack”. Steam up the bathroom by turning on the hot water in your shower, and then sit with your child for 10-15 minutes. Don’t stay in the warm bathroom all night, since it’s not good to get overheated.
- The cool night air can help, too. Take your child outside with you for 15-30 minutes. This works especially well on cool, foggy nights.
- Ibuprofen (Advil, Motrin) can also help if there is a sore throat or fever. Acetaminophen (Tylenol) helps with sore throat or fever, but not with inflammation.

CAN IT BE DANGEROUS?

Usually croup just comes and goes, but if it is severe and breathing is difficult, then it could be dangerous. If your child has moderate or severe croup (or if you aren’t sure), then come into our office to be checked.

- With moderate croup, there is noisy breathing (stridor) even when the child is resting – but there is no difficulty breathing yet. Sometimes home treatments are enough, but often we will also prescribe steroids.
- With severe croup, children work hard to breathe – often using extra muscles in their neck, chest or belly to help them get the air in and out. If you see this, you need to go to the Emergency Department right away. Calling 911 would be a good idea if the breathing looks very scary to you. It is very rare, but on occasion croup can lead to such severe breathing obstruction that hospitalization is necessary.