

Consult your doctor to ensure that this information is right for your child. Information below is for general information and does not constitute medical advice.

What is croup?

Croup is a common respiratory problem characterized by a harsh, barking cough. Croup most often affects young children. It causes inflammation, swelling, and narrowing in the voice box (larynx), windpipe (trachea), and breathing (bronchial) tubes leading to the lungs.

What causes croup?

Croup symptoms often develop a few days after the start of what appears to be an upper respiratory infection (URI), such as a cold. Most cases are caused by human parainfluenza viruses types I and II. However, other viruses, such as influenza viruses types A and B, respiratory syncytial virus (RSV), and measles, can also cause croup. As children grow older and structures in the throat and breathing tubes mature, they are less susceptible to croup.

What are the symptoms?

Symptoms of croup are caused by a narrowed airway and include a barking cough, a raspy, hoarse voice, and a harsh crowing noise when breathing in. Croup usually develops after a day or two of coldlike symptoms, such as a runny nose and congestion. Symptoms of croup often improve during the day and become worse at night; sometimes children have episodes, or attacks, of intense symptoms that wake them up in the middle of the night. Usually symptoms gradually improve within 2 to 5 days.

How is croup diagnosed?

A health professional usually diagnoses croup by using information from a medical history and performing a physical examination.

Since croup can cause breathing difficulty, a pulse oximeter may be placed on your child's finger, toe, or earlobe to measure blood oxygen content. Rarely, an X-ray may be needed to check for complications or to rule out other conditions, such as pneumonia.

How is it treated?

Even though croup is usually a minor illness, your child's coughing and troubled breathing can seem severe and frightening, especially during an episode or attack of intense symptoms. However, even intense symptoms usually improve with home treatment, such as staying calm, soothing your child, and humidifying the air.

If your child has extremely severe difficulty breathing, call 911 or other emergency services immediately.

If intense symptoms of croup do not improve after 30 minutes of home treatment, take your child to an immediate care facility or hospital emergency room. A health professional may give your child extra oxygen or medication to help open the airway. Most often, your child can then go home after treatment and observation.