



Dr. Lara Varisco Leonhardt, MD

---

# Bee well pediatrics

## **What is croup?**

Croup is a viral infection of the vocal cords, voice box (larynx), and windpipe (trachea).

Symptoms of a croup include:

- a tight, low-pitched "barking" cough
- a hoarse voice

You may hear a harsh, raspy, vibrating sound when your child breathes in. This is called stridor. Stridor is usually present only with crying or coughing. As the disease becomes worse, stridor also occurs when your child is sleeping or relaxed.

## **What causes croup?**

Croup is usually part of a cold. Swelling of the vocal cords causes hoarseness. Stridor is caused by the opening between the vocal cords becoming more narrow.

## **How long will it last?**

Croup usually lasts for 5 to 6 days and generally gets worse at night. During this time, it can change from mild to severe and back many times. The worst symptoms are seen in children under 3 years of age.

## **First Aid For Stridor**

If your child suddenly develops stridor or tight breathing, do the following:

- **Inhalation of warm mist**

Warm moist air seems to work best to relax the vocal cords and break the stridor. Use a warm humidifier, fill it with tap water, add vicks vapor steam, and a dash of salt.

- **Cold air**

Cold air sometimes relieves the stridor. If it is cold outside, take your child outdoors. You can also hold your child in front of an open refrigerator/ freezer.

## **Home Care for a Croupy Cough (without stridor)**

- **Humidifier**

Dry air usually makes a cough worse. Keep the child's bedroom humidified. Use a humidifier if you have one. Run it 24 hours a day.

- **Warm fluids for coughing spasms**

Coughing spasms are often due to sticky mucus caught on the vocal cords. Warm fluids may help relax the vocal cords and loosen up the mucus. Use clear fluids (ones you can see through) such as apple juice, lemonade, or herbal tea. Give warm fluids only to children over 4 months old.

- **Cough medicines**

Medicines are much less helpful than either mist or drinking warm, clear fluids. Children over 6 years old can be given cough drops for the cough. Children over 1 year of age can be given 1/2 to 1 teaspoon of honey as needed to thin the secretions. Never give honey to babies. If not available, you can use corn syrup. If your child has a fever (over 102°F, or 38.9°C), you may give him acetaminophen (Tylenol) or ibuprofen (Advil).

- **Smoke exposure**

Never let anyone smoke around your child. Smoke can make croup worse.

- **Contagiousness**

The viruses that cause croup are quite contagious until the fever is gone or at least during the first 3 days of illness. Since spread of this infection can't be prevented, your child can return to school or child care once he feels better.

### **When should I call my child's healthcare provider?**

Call IMMEDIATELY if:

- Breathing becomes difficult (when your child is not coughing).
- Your child starts drooling or spitting, or starts having great difficulty swallowing.
- The warm mist fails to clear up the stridor in 20 minutes.