



Croup in the Child Care Setting

What is croup?

Croup is a very common respiratory problem. It is a swelling of the airway at the voice box (larynx) and windpipe (trachea) usually caused by a virus. The same virus that causes croup can cause other respiratory diseases like bronchitis, bronchiolitis and pneumonia. Croup is characterized by a harsh barking cough that can be scary for children and caregivers.

Who gets it and when?

Croup is most common in children under 3 years of age. Some children get croup as often as they have a respiratory illness. It can occur at any time of the year, but is most common between October and March.

What are the symptoms?

When a child has croup, the airway just below the vocal cords becomes narrow. This makes breathing noisy and difficult. Usually a child with croup has a low fever. Because the voice box contains the vocal cords, the main symptom of croup is a harsh cough that sounds like a seal barking, following a runny nose, cough and hoarseness. Croup usually gets worse at night with a crowing sound while breathing. Croup may last one to seven days. Croup is usually managed by moisturizing the air.

If the child stops breathing or begins to turn blue, call Emergency Medical Services (9-1-1).

How is it spread?

The germs which cause croup are spread from person to person by contact with respiratory secretions (sneezing, coughing, saliva). Croup is about as contagious as the common cold.

Should a child with croup stay home?

A child with croup should stay home if they don't feel well enough to participate in activities or if they require more care than the staff can safely provide while caring for other children in the program.

When should the child be sent home and seen by a health care provider?

A child who rapidly develops a crowing sound when breathing in and out (while at rest) needs to be seen by a health care provider. This child may appear very sick, with a high fever, drooling, and a preference for sitting up. These symptoms are due to blocked air passages.

What can be done to limit the spread?

To prevent the spread of infection, follow routine healthy practices.

- Handwashing is the most important infection control measure. Make sure that all children and staff use good handwashing practices, especially after wiping or blowing noses; after contact with any nose, throat or eye secretions; before preparing or eating food; after toileting.
- Routinely clean and disinfect frequently touched surfaces and surfaces soiled with body fluids.
- Make sure that the facility is well ventilated, and that children are not crowded together, especially during naps on floor mats or cots. Open the windows and have the children play outside as much as possible, even in the winter.
- Teach children to cough and sneeze into their elbow, wipe noses using disposable tissues, throw the tissue into the wastebasket, and wash their hands.

References

Managing Infectious Diseases in Child Care and Schools, 5th Edition, 2017
American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP)
Redbook Online, Parainfluenza Viral Infections, AAP, 2021-2024