

BREATH-HOLDING SPELLS

DEFINITION

- Breath holding is preceded by an upsetting event, such as falling down, being frustrated or angry, or being frightened.
- Your child gives out one or two long cries and then holds his breath in expiration until the lips become bluish.
- Your child then passes out. (One third of children occasionally progress to having a few twitches or muscle jerks.)
- Your child then resumes normal breathing and becomes fully alert in less than 1 minute.
- Onset is between 6 months and 2 years old. They occur only while the child is awake.

Cause

Breath-holding spells are caused by an abnormal reflex that allows 5% of children to hold their breath long enough to actually pass out. It's not deliberate in most children. Holding the breath (when angry) and becoming bluish *without* passing out are common and not considered abnormal.

Expected Course

Breath-holding spells usually occur from one or two times daily to one or two times per month and are gone by 4 or years of age. They are dangerous, and they don't lead to epilepsy or brain damage.

HOME CARE

Treatment during Attacks of Breath Holding.

These attacks are harmless and always stop by themselves. Since it's difficult to accurately estimate the length of an attack, time a few using a watch with a second hand. Have your child lie flat (rather than being held upright) to increase blood flow to the brain (this position may prevent some of the muscle jerking). Apply a

cold, wet washcloth to your child's forehead until he starts breathing again. Don't start resuscitation or call 911—it's unnecessary. Also don't put anything in your child's mouth; it could cause your child to choke or vomit.

Treatment After Attacks of Breath Holding.

Give your child a brief hug and go about your business. A relaxed attitude is best. If you are frightened, don't let your child know it. If your child had a temper tantrum because he wanted his way, don't give in to him after the attack.

Prevention of Breath Holding Spells.

Most attacks from falling down or a sudden fright can't be prevented; neither can most attacks that are triggered by anger. However, if your child is having daily attacks, he probably has learned to trigger the attacks himself. This happens when parents run to the child and pick him up every time he starts to cry or when they give him his way as soon as the attack is over. Avoid these responses, and your child won't have an undue number of attacks.

CALL OUR OFFICE

During regular hours if:

- Your child is unconscious for more than 1 minute (by the clock).
- Any muscle jerks occur during the attack.
- More than one spell occurs per week (so we can prevent them from becoming more frequent).
- You have other questions about breath holding.

CAUTION: Call a rescue squad (911) if your child has a different kind of attack where he stops breathing for more than 1 minute or turns white (not blue).