

## The drowsy child

If your child cannot be woken up despite persistent efforts then he or she may be in a 'coma'. A child in a coma is deeply unconscious and will need close medical care.

### Why is your child in a coma?

Children may be in a coma for a lot of different reasons. Sometimes it can be very clear why (for example a severe bump to the head), but sometimes it can be very difficult to find out why (for example, a rare problem with the chemicals in the body).

Possible causes include:

- Injury to the head
- A fit or convulsion
- Infection in the blood stream ('sepsis')
- Infection in or around the brain ('encephalitis' or 'meningitis')
- Low blood sugar ('hypoglycaemia')
- Chemical upsets in the body ('metabolic illness')
- Accidental overdose of medicines

The doctors and nurses will be asking lots of questions about your child. They will also be taking a number of tests from your child to try to find the cause of the coma. This may take some time.

### How can you help?

Tell the doctors and nurses straight away if you think anything may have caused the problem. In particular:

- Have you seen your child shaking?
- Has your child had a high fever?
- Are there any pills or drugs in the house which your child may have taken?
- Is your child allergic to any medications?
- Has your child taken aspirin?
- Has your child been in contact with anyone with meningitis or cold sores?
- Is there anyone in your family who has had a very poorly baby or child?
- Has your child been abroad?

### What tests will be taken?

First some blood tests will be taken and a sample of urine collected. The results of these tests will help the doctors and nurses decide what the cause is and what treatment to start. Most of these test

results should be ready within a few hours, but some take several days.

If it seems likely that your child has an infection in or around the brain ('encephalitis' or 'meningitis') then a test called a lumbar puncture or 'LP' may be needed. This test involves placing a very thin needle into the small of your child's back to collect a sample of the fluid from around the spinal cord and brain. The needle is then removed. This test will be done only when it is safe, as your child needs to be held for some time in a curled up position.

Another test which may be needed is a brain scan or 'CT scan'. This is a special X-ray of your child's head, which can show any swelling of the brain. Your child will need to lie very still in a large doughnut-shaped machine and therefore may need to be given an anaesthetic (sent to sleep with medicines).



A patient having a CT scan of the brain

Again this will only be done if your child is well enough at the time.

### What treatments will be given?

Over the first few hours the doctors and nurses will want to make sure that your child is breathing comfortably. If there are any concerns about this then your child may be placed on a breathing machine ('ventilator') until he or she can breathe again without needing this help.

If your child's heart cannot keep pumping blood around the rest of the body well enough, then fluids ('a drip') and medicines may be given to help.

Sometimes, the pressure within the brain can get very high due to swelling. Special treatments may be needed to help reduce this pressure and swelling.

Strong antibiotics will be used to treat any bacterial infection of the blood ('sepsis') or infection of the fluid around the brain ('meningitis'). If there is an infection caused by a virus in the brain ('encephalitis') then another medicine will be used to help treat this.

Other special medicines may be required depending on the results of the tests and the likely cause of the coma.

### What happens next?

What happens next will depend on what the cause is and how poorly your child is. Some children will need to go to the intensive care unit, while others may be able to go to the children's ward.

Your child's doctors and nurses are always available to discuss your concerns and answer your questions as best they can.

### Further information

A website is provided by "Contact A Family" at [www.cafamily.org.uk](http://www.cafamily.org.uk) for details about various causes of coma and local support groups for parents and families.

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The National Reye's Syndrome Foundation UK  
A condition which can cause coma in children  
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# My child won't wake up



A leaflet for parents of a child in a coma