

Laryngitis

Laryngitis is an inflammation of your voice box (larynx) due to overuse, irritation or respiratory infection. The larynx is a framework of cartilage, muscle and mucous membrane that forms the entrance of your windpipe (trachea). Inside the larynx are your vocal cords - two folds of mucous membrane covering muscle and cartilage.

Normally, your vocal cords open and close smoothly forming sounds through their movement and vibration. When air escapes between the cords when it is not supposed to, your voice sounds breathy, raspy and hoarse. Your voice may sound higher or lower than normal. The sound may be due to a weak or slightly paralyzed vocal cord on one side, polyps (small, soft growths), or nodules, which are harder growths.

SIGNS & SYMPTOMS

Laryngitis often makes you feel the need to constantly clear your throat. Other signs and symptoms may include:

- Hoarseness
- Tickling sensation and rawness of your throat
- Swollen vocal cords
- Dry throat
- Dry cough
- Sore throat
- Weak voice

CAUSES

Acute Laryngitis: Acute laryngitis occurs suddenly and does not last long.

- *Illness* - Usually, a viral infection such as a cold or the flu (influenza) causes acute laryngitis. A bacterial infection also may be the cause.
- *Irritation* - Excessive talking or singing, allergies and breathing substances such as tobacco smoke and certain chemicals also can cause acute laryngitis.

Chronic Laryngitis: Laryngitis is chronic if the hoarseness in your throat lasts for a long time.

- *Constant irritation* - Heavy smoking or excessive drinking of alcohol may inflame your vocal cords. Smoking also may cause polyps - small, soft growths on the mucous membrane covering your vocal cords. Polyps may interfere with the normal movement of your vocal cords.
- *Repeated overuse* - Excessive and repeated talking or singing can cause contact ulcers or the growth of polyps or nodules on your vocal cords. Nodules differ from polyps in that nodules occur on the layer that covers the mucous membrane. Nodules are also more like calluses and not as soft as polyps.
- *Aging* - As you age, your vocal cords can lose tension. With less tension, the cords no longer vibrate as they did before.
- *Nerve damage* - Injury to or pressure on the nerves supplying muscles that move your vocal cords - such as a blow to your larynx during an accident - can cause vocal cord paralysis.

PREVENTION

To prevent dryness or irritation to your vocal cords:

- Do not smoke and avoid secondhand smoke.
- Drink plenty of water.
- Limit alcohol and caffeine to prevent a dry throat.
- Avoid clearing your throat.

SCHEDULING AN APPOINTMENT

Call 275-2662 to schedule an appointment at the University Health Service (UHS). All visits to UHS are confidential.

RISK FACTORS

The following factors place you at greater risk of developing laryngitis:

- Overusing your voice by speaking too much, speaking too loudly, shouting or singing.
- Having respiratory infections, such as a cold, influenza, bronchitis or sinusitis.
- Exposure to irritating substances, such as cigarette smoke, excessive alcohol, stomach acid or workplace chemicals.

DIAGNOSIS

You may be asked to describe your signs and symptoms, how long you have had them, and whether any overuse, such as singing or shouting, may have irritated your vocal cords. You might also be asked if you smoke and if any other health conditions such as a cold, influenza or allergies may be causing vocal irritation. Your health care provider may want to listen to your voice and to look at your vocal cords using a procedure called laryngoscopy, which involves by using a light and a tiny mirror to look into the back of your throat.

TREATMENT

You can manage most acute cases of hoarseness or laryngitis, including those caused by viral infections or occasional overuse, by following self-care steps to relieve irritation and hoarseness:

- Moisten your throat.
- Keep the air's humidity level high throughout your living space.
- Use an ultrasonic humidifier in your bedroom at night.
- Try eating soft, easy-to-swallow foods.
- A hoarse or weak voice associated with a cold usually will go away after 2 or 3 days.
- Avoid talking or singing too loudly or for too long to reduce strain or overuse. If you need to speak before large groups, try to use a microphone or megaphone.
- Rest your voice when you can.
- Seek voice training if you are a singer or if your voice quality is important.
- Avoid whispering, which puts even more strain on your voice than normal speech.

The treatment your primary care provider may recommend will depend on the cause of the laryngitis. Treatments include:

- *If you have a respiratory infection such as a cold*, your provider may take a throat culture. For a bacterial infection such as strep throat, antibiotics may be prescribed.
- *If polyps are the cause of your hoarse voice*, your provider may recommend outpatient surgery to remove them.
- *For chronic hoarseness due to a loosening of your vocal cords*, surgically tightening the cords or injecting human collagen, a fibrous material, may stiffen a relaxed cord and return its normal function.
- *For chronic hoarseness associated with other conditions, such as heartburn, smoking or alcoholism*: managing the underlying condition can help improve voice quality.
- *For treatment of vocal cord paralysis*, the approach depends on the underlying cause. But treatment may include injection of collagen into the tissues adjacent to the vocal cords or thyroplasty - surgery to improve the voice by altering the cartilage of the larynx.

LINKS

MEDLINE Plus

<http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/ency/article/001385.htm>