

Voice Disorders – Hoarseness

Voice is produced by the voice box (larynx). Functions of the voice box include breathing, production of voice, and protection of the airway during swallowing.

Changes to voice from normal are termed “hoarseness”. Hoarse voice can describe changes in pitch, raspiness, or change in volume. Changes in voice can occur in anyone, but are often more common in individuals that use their voice professionally such as singers, teachers, lawyers, etc.

Causes for hoarseness include laryngitis, voice overuse/abuse, benign vocal cord nodules or masses, acid reflux, smoking, allergies, and throat/larynx cancer.

Acute laryngitis often presents during an upper respiratory infection or after overuse of voice. Typically, symptoms resolve after several days. If the voice continues to be hoarse, further evaluation is needed.

Vocal abuse can occur after an acute episode of excessive voice use or excessively straining one’s voice during speech. Tips for avoiding voice overuse and resultant hoarseness are provided ([HYPERLINK_TIPS FOR IMPROVING A HOARSE VOICE](#)).

Prolonged vocal abuse can lead to development of vocal cord nodules or cysts. These are benign growths that appear on the vocal cords due to prolonged irritation. Modification of voice use can often help resolve these conditions over time, and occasionally require surgery for correction.

Acid reflux is a common cause of hoarseness. Acid reflux is typically associated with symptoms of heartburn and regurgitation. These symptoms occur when the esophagus (feeding tube) is irritated from stomach acid, and is called gastro-esophageal reflux disease (GERD). When stomach acid continues to travel upwards and gets to the level of the throat to cause irritation, it is called laryngopharyngeal reflux (LPR). Symptoms can include hoarseness, throat pain, a feeling of a lump in throat, and difficulty swallowing. In most cases, people with throat symptoms from acid reflux do not have heartburn or regurgitation.

Smoking is a common cause of hoarseness, due to inhalation of multiple irritants affecting the vocal cords. Prolonged tobacco use can lead to development of throat and voice box cancer. Symptoms including hoarseness, difficulty swallowing, weight loss, and shortness of breath warrant further evaluation in individuals who use tobacco.

Evaluation of the voice box is performed in clinic with use of an endoscope. The procedure is called a laryngoscopy, and allows for visualization of the back of the throat and voice box. Typically, an anesthetic is used, and the procedure is performed in clinic with minimal to no discomfort. Laryngoscopy allows for identification of the cause of hoarseness, to guide further treatment.

Treatment of voice disorders is based on the cause. Typically, hoarse voice after a common cold or upper respiratory infection improves within a few weeks. Benign nodules or cysts are managed with modification techniques when using voice and occasionally require surgery. Symptoms originating from acid reflux are treated with antacids and lifestyle modifications. Proper evaluation and identification of the source of hoarseness allows for guided treatment.

TIPS FOR IMPROVING A HOARSE VOICE

- **Break the throat clearing habit** by taking sips of water regularly throughout the day
- **Break up mucus** in the throat with a non-prescription expectorant (e.g. Robitussin)
- **Quit smoking** and avoid smoke-filled environment
- **Use a humidifier** during the heating season
- **Don’t use your voice non-stop** at work. Organize your schedule to include regular periods of voice rest.
- **Keep volume down:** In conversation, don’t scream or try to talk over loud noises. Avoid noisy environments such as nightclubs and sporting events.

- **Find the right volume** for your voice and avoid strain. Take a deep breath and use abdominal and chest muscles (diaphragm) to produce a forceful, but unstrained voice level.
- **When speaking in public**, maintain an erect but relaxed posture; speak within your normal pitch range, and use a microphone or megaphone for amplification, rather than trying to shout for an extended period of time.
- **Avoid excessive use/abuse of your voice when at home.** Limit the amount of time talking on the telephone.
- **Avoid getting overtired.**