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Laryngitis

What is laryngitis?

Laryngitis is inflammation of the vocal cords and the area around them (the larynx, or voice box). It causes hoarseness. Sometimes it's hard to speak at all. Laryngitis may be acute or chronic. Acute laryngitis occurs suddenly and lasts no more than a few days. Laryngitis is chronic if the hoarseness in your throat lasts for a long time.

How does it occur?

Laryngitis can be a symptom of a cold, flu, bronchitis, sinusitis, and other respiratory infections or allergies. Acute laryngitis is usually caused by a virus, but it can also result from a bacterial infection.

Chronic laryngitis can be caused by:

- heavy smoking
- shouting, singing, or excessive use of the voice, such as in teaching or public speaking
- coughing forcefully
- exposure to dust or chemicals.

Medical conditions that can cause symptoms similar to laryngitis or cause a change in the voice over the course of a few weeks are:

- thyroid disease
- noncancerous growths on the vocal cords
- cancer of the vocal cords.

What are the symptoms?

Symptoms of both acute and chronic laryngitis may include:

- low, raspy voice and hoarseness
- a cough that is dry (meaning that you usually aren't coughing up mucus)
- a throat that feels dry
- a sore throat
- a voice that weakens as the day progresses.

Sometimes you may lose your voice completely.

How is it diagnosed?

Your health care provider will ask about your symptoms and how long you have had them. Your provider will listen to your voice and examine you. Your provider will also examine your thyroid (the gland located near your voice box) and the lymph nodes (often called glands) in your neck. Lab tests and x-rays may be done, but often they do not find a specific cause. If necessary, your health care provider will look at your voice box and surrounding area with a flexible laryngoscope (a special light to see past your tongue).

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How is it treated?

The main treatment is resting your voice as much as you can. Your health care provider may recommend taking a nonprescription pain reliever, such as ibuprofen. He or she may also prescribe medicine. For example, your provider may prescribe a steroid spray for your throat. Or, if your laryngitis is caused by sinusitis or bronchitis, your treatment may include taking medicine for these conditions.

How long will the effects last?

When acute laryngitis is caused by a virus, it usually goes away in a few days without medicine. Laryngitis caused by bacteria should also be better in a few days with treatment. If you have chronic laryngitis, your condition should improve with a week of resting your voice. If your hoarseness lasts more than 3 weeks, see your health care provider. You may need more tests to check for other diseases.

How can I take care of myself?

- Follow the treatment prescribed by your health care provider.
- Do not smoke.
- Avoid breathing irritating smoke, dust, and fumes.
- Rest your voice as much as possible.
- Drink extra fluids, such as water, fruit juice, and tea.
- Take hot, steamy showers and breathe in the moist air, or breathe through a hot, moist towel.
- Use a vaporizer or humidifier to add moisture to the air.
- See your provider if your laryngitis lasts more than 3 weeks.

What can I do to help prevent laryngitis?

- Get plenty of rest when you have a viral or bacterial infection, such as a cold or sinusitis.
- Avoid vocal strain by not yelling, screaming, or talking loudly, especially when you have a cold or other throat or sinus infection.
- Don't smoke and avoid exposure to smoke.
- Keep your home well humidified.

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