Laryngitis

Information for you
Introduction

Laryngitis is inflammation of your voice box (larynx) due to overuse, irritation or infection. The larynx is a framework of cartilage, muscles and mucous membranes that forms the entrance of your windpipe (trachea). Inside the larynx are your vocal cords — two folds of mucous membrane (special lining) covering muscle and cartilage – which are located behind your Adam’s apple.

Normally your vocal cords open and close smoothly, forming sounds through their movement and vibration. But when the vocal cords become irritated and inflamed, they swell, causing distortion of the vocal sound. As a result, your voice sounds hoarse, ‘rough’ or can become so faint as to be undetectable. Laryngitis can be both painful and very frustrating – especially if you rely on your voice for your work.

Signs and symptoms

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

• Hoarseness
• Weak voice / loss of voice quality with use
• Tickling sensation / irritation and rawness of your throat
• Sore or Dry throat
• Dry cough – can become chronic
• Feeling of a lump in the throat or pain on swallowing

Causes

Laryngitis may be short-lived (acute) or long-lasting (chronic). The most common cause is a viral infection, however bacterial infections such as diphtheria may occasionally be the cause. Acute laryngitis may also occur during the course of (or after) another illness, such as a cold, flu or pneumonia.

Laryngitis can also be caused, or made worse, by irritants to the vocal cords, such as alcohol, smoking, allergies, direct trauma, vocal overuse / misuse or reflux of stomach acid into the oesophagus and throat (Gastroesophageal Reflux Disease - GORD).

In adults, other causes of chronic hoarseness may include sores on the vocal cords (for example, contact ulcers), lumps and bumps on the vocal cords (for example, nodules or polyps) or stretching/bowing of vocal cords due to age or incorrect voicing techniques.
Risk factors
The following places you at greater risk of developing laryngitis:

- Having a respiratory infection, such as a cold, ‘flu, bronchitis or sinusitis
- Exposure to irritants such as cigarette smoke, excessive alcohol, stomach acid (reflux / heart burn) or workplace chemicals / dust
- Overuse of the voice, by speaking too much or too loudly, shouting, singing, coughing or straining your voice (for example, over background noise).

Treatment
Laryngitis is usually a temporary problem that either improves by itself or clears after treatment. Treatment depends on the cause of the laryngitis. The best treatment for the most common cause, a virus, is to rest your voice as much as possible and avoid clearing your throat. If an inhaled irritant is to blame, avoid the irritant as much as possible.

For chronic laryngitis associated with other conditions, such as heartburn, smoking or excess alcohol intake, managing the underlying condition is necessary for improvement.
Looking after the Voice / Throat

Do:

• **Drink plenty of water.** Fluids help keep the mucus in your throat thin and easy to clear. It also ‘plumps up’ the vocal cords, allowing them to function correctly. Very cold, fizzy water has been shown to be most effective in reducing a cough.

• **Moisten your throat.** Try sucking on lozenges or boiled sweets, but avoid medicated pastilles which can hide the symptoms by numbing pain, without treating the underlying cause. Try a steam inhalation (bowl of hot water and breathe in the steam) to soothe and moisten the throat.

• **Gargle.** Try gargling with salt water twice a day.

• **Treat heartburn/indigestion** through medicine, raising the head of the bed and avoiding food / liquid 2 – 3 hours before sleeping. See your GP if needed.

• **Give your voice a break** if it is tired or sore and speak gently.

• **Seek voice training.** Consider this if you're a singer, or if your voice quality is important, either through a Speech & Language Therapist, vocal coach or singing teacher, to ensure correct vocal technique is being used.
Don’t:

• **Don’t cough/clear your throat.** This does more harm than good in the long run. Coughing causes the vocal cords to bang together sharply, resulting in increased stress, swelling and irritation of the larynx. The throat then secretes more mucus (which is thick, sticky and hard to move), to try and protect the vocal cords, making the problem worse. Instead of coughing, try a strong swallow, or take a sip of very cold, fizzy water. If needed, try a very gentle throat clear instead of coughing.

• **Don't smoke and avoid second-hand smoke** where possible. Smoke dries your throat and irritates your vocal cords. Smoking can cause cancer.

Try to avoid:

• **Alcohol and caffeine.** If you have laryngitis, avoid both substances - they tend to dry the throat, as both are diuretics (take water out of the body), making the voice worse and the throat more prone to damage.

• **Avoid whispering.** This puts more strain on your voice than normal speech and will make the voice tire quickly, leading to strain. Try speaking very quietly instead.

• **Avoid talking or singing too loudly or for too long.** If you need to speak before large groups, use a microphone wherever possible and always face your audience.
Useful Contacts:

- The Voice Care Network (UK): www.voicecare.org.uk
- Voice Disorders Website: www.lary.org.uk

Notes
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