

Colorado Children's Ear Nose and Throat, P.C.

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Vocal Cord Lesions

What are vocal cord lesions?

Vocal cord lesions are growths or sores that change the quality of your voice. There are three main kinds of vocal cord lesions: polyps, leukoplakia, and contact ulcers.

Polyps are growths that occur with hypothyroidism; radiation therapy in the neck; or long-lasting sinusitis with drainage, cough, and frequent throat clearing.

Leukoplakia are thick, white patches of abnormal tissue, often caused by chemical irritation from tobacco smoke or alcohol.

Contact ulcers are sores that develop on the vocal cords in actors, teachers, preachers, and public speakers who abuse their voice by speaking forcefully.

How do they occur?

Overuse of the voice is the most common cause of swollen or inflamed vocal cords. In addition, smoking often causes vocal cord lesions. Chemical irritants may also contribute to problems.

What are the symptoms?

The first symptom is hoarseness, which occurs when the growth or growths interfere with the flow of air past the vocal cords or the function of the cords. Your voice may become breathy, harsh, or high-pitched.

Contact ulcers make it painful to use your voice. If they keep returning, scar tissue may develop on the vocal cords.

How are they diagnosed?

The doctor will examine your vocal cords with a viewing instrument or with mirrors.

If you have leukoplakia, the doctor may want you to have a biopsy of the white patches. For a biopsy the doctor will take a sample of tissue from the patches and examine the tissue under a microscope to learn more about the patches.

How are they treated?

The doctor will advise you to change the way you use your voice and may refer you to a speech therapist.

Some growths require surgical removal. The doctor will give you an anesthetic before the procedure.

Leukoplakia require a special test to determine whether cancer is present. The doctor will advise you to stop smoking immediately and rest your voice.

Contact ulcers are treated with measures to reduce vocal strain and with medications. Also, the doctor may recommend that you raise the head of your bed when you sleep.

How long will the effects last?

Your voice may or may not return to normal, depending on the cause of the problem and the treatment. The doctor will tell you how long to rest your voice and what changes, if any, to expect.

How can I take care of myself?

Follow the treatment prescribed by the doctor. In addition:

- Avoid smoking.
- Rest your voice as much as you can, and avoid situations that strain your voice, such as shouting and cheering at sporting events.
- Cut back on your activities.
- Drink extra fluids such as water, fruit juice, and tea.
- Use a cool-mist humidifier at home.
- Take hot showers and breathe the warm, moist air.
- Breathe through a hot, moist towel.
- Use pain relievers and throat sprays as instructed by the doctor when you must use your voice extensively.

How can I prevent vocal cord lesions?

Avoid smoking, voice abuse, and chemical irritants.

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