Better Health Channel

Health.vic

Victoria's hub for health services and business

DHHS

A gateway to the strategies, policies, programs and services delivered by the Department of Health & Human Services.

Seniors Online

Victorian government portal for older people, with information about government and community services and programs.

Search site or services

Type a minimum of three characters then press UP or DOWN on the keyboard to navigate the autocomplete search results

Navigation

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The larynx (voice box) contains the vocal cords, which allow speech. Disorders of the larynx include laryngitis, croup, growths and cancer. A common irritation to the larynx is voice abuse, which includes screaming, singing or shouting too much.

The larynx, or voice box, sits at the back of the throat, above the windpipe (trachea). It is supported by rings of cartilage, which form the bump of the Adam’s apple. The vocal cords are stretchy bands of tissue attached to the inside of the larynx. Air passing in and out of the lungs is pushed through these cords. Movements of the cartilage allow the vocal cords to contract or relax, which changes the pitch of sounds. Other body parts that influence the qualities of a person’s voice include the nose, mouth, tongue, jaw and throat.

The larynx also contains an important flap or valve called the epiglottis, which covers the trachea whenever we swallow to prevent foods or liquid entering the lungs. Various infections and disorders, such as cancer, can affect the larynx. The usual symptom is hoarseness.

Symptoms of larynx disorders

Symptoms of larynx disorders depend on the cause, but may include:

- Hoarseness
- Loss of voice
- Pain in the throat
- A sensation of raw tenderness at the back of the throat
- A constant urge to clear the throat
- Breathing difficulties.

Acute laryngitis symptoms

Acute laryngitis is characterised by the sudden inflammation of the larynx, caused by a viral infection such as the common cold. Overusing the voice, for example, yelling or singing, or irritation from cigarette smoke can also cause the larynx to redden and swell.

Chronic laryngitis symptoms

Persistent hoarseness is almost always caused by either irritation from cigarette smoke or voice abuse, such as frequent shouting. Prolonged exposure to air pollutants, such as dust, can also irritate your larynx and cause chronic laryngitis.

Croup and its effects on children

Croup is a form of viral laryngitis specific to children, usually aged between six months and six years. The virus produces inflammation and swelling of the larynx and associated structures, such as the trachea and the airways leading to each lung.

Typical symptoms include:

- A cough that sounds like a barking seal
- Mild fever
- Noisy breathing that is worse at night
- Breathing difficulties, due to the swelling.

In the severe form of croup, certain areas (such as the mouth or fingertips) may turn blue from lack of oxygen (cyanosis). Sometimes, a bacterium can infect the larynx, causing a similar but life-threatening illness called epiglottitis. The child will usually have a high fever and look very unwell. The HIB vaccination routinely given to infants usually prevents epiglottitis. An inhaled foreign body may also produce a croup-like illness.

Ulcers affecting the trachea
Certain sounds are made by abruptly lowering the epiglottis onto the trachea. If this is performed repeatedly, while shouting or straining the voice, an ulcer can develop from the abrasion of the epiglottis against surrounding tissue.

**Polyps, nodules and growths on the larynx**

Small lumps and bumps on the vocal cords can be caused by chronic voice abuse (such as yelling) or prolonged exposure to irritants like cigarette smoke. Any growths need thorough investigation to make sure they are not cancerous.

**Cancer of the larynx**

The two main types of cancer of the larynx include squamous cell carcinoma and verrucous carcinoma. Most cases of cancer are directly linked to cigarette smoking. Initial hoarseness is followed by a dry cough and, sometimes, coughing up blood. Eventually, the person experiences breathing and swallowing difficulties.

**Diagnosis of larynx disorders**

The larynx can be viewed through the open mouth. Diagnosis methods depend on the disorder, but may include:

- Physical examination
- Neck x-ray and fluoroscopy (which uses real-time x-rays to show movement of a body part)
- Laryngoscopy (using a piece of equipment called a laryngoscope to view the throat)
- Biopsy (taking a sample of tissue for testing).

**Treatment of larynx disorders**

Treatment depends on the cause, but may include:

- Acute laryngitis – resting the voice, pain-killing medications and steam inhalation
- Chronic laryngitis – speech therapy, resting the voice, steam inhalation and, if necessary, antibiotics to clear up any infection
- Croup – fluids, paracetamol, rest and possibly steam inhalation are usually all that is required. When there is breathing difficulty, a short course of corticosteroid may be used. In severe cases of breathing difficulty, the child may need to be hospitalised, given nebulised adrenaline and – sometimes – intubated (a tube is placed in the airway to overcome the blockage).
- Inhaled foreign bodies – usually removed by bronchoscopy in hospital, under general anaesthetic
- Ulcers – resting the voice for at least six weeks, and learning to treat the vocal cords with respect to avoid recurrence
- Polyps, nodules and growths – the lumps and bumps are surgically removed. Nodules in children can sometimes be treated solely with voice therapy, which teaches them how to use their voice without unnecessary strain
- Cancer – radiation therapy and surgery, including the partial or complete removal of the larynx (laryngectomy). In order to speak after undergoing a laryngectomy, the person can either learn to swallow and exhale air through their oesophagus, or use an electro-larynx device held against the throat.

**Where to get help**

- Your doctor
- NURSE-ON-CALL Tel. 1300 60 60 24 – for expert health information and advice (24 hours, 7 days)
- Ear, nose and throat specialist
- Cancer Council Victoria Information and Support Service Tel. 131 120

**Things to remember**

- The larynx (voice box) contains the vocal cords, which allow speech.
- Disorders of the larynx include laryngitis, croup, growths and cancer.
- A common irritation to the larynx is voice abuse, which includes screaming, singing or shouting too much.

**References**


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- talk to your doctor or pharmacist
- dial triple zero (000) in an emergency
- ring NURSE-ON-CALL Tel. 1300 60 60 24.

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More information

Ear nose and throat

The following content is displayed as Tabs. Once you have activated a link navigate to the end of the list to view its associated content. The activated link is defined as

Active Tab

Ear basics
Ear conditions

Hearing loss

Nose conditions

Throat conditions

Ear basics

- Ear problems in children
  Babies and young children are more likely to develop middle ear infections because they are still building up their immunity.

- Ears
  The brain uses the inner ear, the eyes and muscles to pinpoint the position of the body at all times.

- Ear wax
  In most cases, blockage of the ear canal with wax is a harmless event.

Ear conditions

- Acoustic neuroma
  In its earlier stages, an acoustic neuroma can present similar symptoms to other, less serious conditions, which may delay diagnosis and treatment.

- Benign paroxysmal positional vertigo (BPPV)
  Benign paroxysmal positional vertigo (BPPV) is a condition characterised by episodes of sudden and severe vertigo.

- Dizziness and vertigo
  Dizziness is generally treatable and rarely indicates serious brain disease.

- Ear infections
  It is estimated that around four out of five children will experience a middle ear infection at least once.

- Ears - Meniere's disease
  Meniere's disease affects the ear, which is the centre of hearing and balance.

- Ears - otosclerosis
  Otosclerosis eventually affects both ears, but the condition doesn't cause total deafness.

- Labyrinthitis and vestibular neuritis
  Labyrinthitis and vestibular neuritis are disorders that result in inflammation of the inner ear and the nerve connecting the inner ear to the brain.

- Middle ear infections
  Middle ear infections often happen during or after a child has a cold.

- Swimmer's ear
  Swimmer's ear can be triggered by exposure to water or mechanical damage due to overzealous cleaning.

- Tinnitus
  Tinnitus cannot be cured, but it can be managed with some lifestyle changes.

Hearing loss

- Deafness - a range of causes
  Deafness is caused by many different events including injury, disease and genetic defects.

- Ears - ways to protect your hearing
  Once hearing is damaged, it often can't be restored.

- Hearing loss - auditory neuropathy
  Auditory neuropathy is hearing loss caused by a disruption of nerve impulses travelling from the inner ear to the brain.

- Hearing loss - communication in the workplace
  If you are unsure how to best communicate with a colleague who has a hearing impairment, ask them.

- Hearing loss - how it affects people
Many people with hearing loss experience a drop in self-esteem and confidence because of their impaired ability to communicate.

- **Hearing loss - lipreading**
  Lipreading can help people who are hearing impaired to cope better with their hearing loss.

- **Hearing problems - hyperacusis**
  Reduced sound tolerance can confine a person to their home, affect their career and social life, and make everyday activities impossible.

- **Hearing problems in children**
  The earlier that hearing loss is identified in children, the better for the child's language, learning and overall development.

- **Hearing tests**
  A ringing sensation in the ears (tinnitus), or people complaining that you talk too loudly are signs you may need to have your hearing checked.

- **Sign language - Auslan**
  Like any language, Auslan continues to evolve to meet the communication needs of people who are deaf.

**Nose conditions**

- **Adenoids**
  Since adenoids are constantly in the path of germs, infections are common.

- **Anosmia - loss of smell**
  People are less sensitive to smells the older they get, and women tend to have a more acute sense of smell than men.

- **Nosebleeds**
  Bleeding from the nose is common in children and is usually not severe or serious.

- **Polyps**
  Nasal polyps can sometimes interfere with breathing.

**Throat conditions**

- **Croup**
  Croup is a viral infection of the throat and windpipe that causes noisy breathing, a husky voice and a harsh, barking cough.

- **Larynx**
  Prolonged exposure to air pollutants, such as dust, can irritate the larynx and cause chronic laryngitis.

- **Rheumatic fever**
  Untreated rheumatic fever can lead to serious complications such as rheumatic heart disease.

- **Sleep apnoea**
  A person with sleep apnoea may wake hundreds of times every night.

- **Streptococcal infection - group A**
  Streptococcal infection ? group A can cause sore throats (pharyngitis), scarlet fever or impetigo (school sores).

- **Throat cancer**
  Risk factors for throat cancer include smoking and heavy alcohol consumption.

- **Tonsillitis**
  Because most attacks of tonsillitis are caused by viruses, most of the treatment is aimed at helping to relieve the symptoms.

**Related Information**

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**Related information on other websites**

- Emory University GA, USA - Pharynx and Larynx.

**Content Partner**

This page has been produced in consultation with and approved by: Better Health Channel - (need new cp)

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Page content currently being reviewed.

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**Medical Dictionary**