

Laryngitis

What is laryngitis?

Laryngitis is a relatively minor infection or inflammation of the larynx (voice box) which is situated at the top of the trachea (windpipe) and joins it to the back of the throat. The vocal cords are in the larynx. The problem usually seems a lot worse than it really is because of the marked effect on one's voice.

What is the cause of laryngitis?

It is invariably caused by a seasonal viral infection that also leads to a cold or sore throat. This infection causes inflammation and swelling of the lining of the larynx, including the vocal cords. Sometimes laryngitis may be part of a more generalised infection such as pharyngitis or influenza. Laryngitis can also be caused by irritation from cigarette smoke, allergies or excessive use of the voice. Rarely, it can be due to a bacterial infection or a tumour.

What are the symptoms?

The main symptom is hoarseness which may persist for a few days and lead to loss of the voice. Even speaking in a whisper may be painful. Other symptoms include a flu-like illness, cough, slight fever, 'tickling' in the back of the throat and tiredness. Soreness is often present over the 'Adam's apple'.

What can aggravate laryngitis?

Factors that make it worse include smoking, excessive alcohol drinking, exposure to irritants such as pollutants (including fumes), air-conditioning systems and extremely cold weather. Continuing to talk or straining your voice will also aggravate the problem.

What is the expected outcome?

Viral laryngitis gets better spontaneously but can take any time from 3 to 14 days. If the problem lasts longer than 14 days, make sure you have a check-up. You may have a croaky voice for a few days even though the infection has cleared up. If you have any breathing difficulty, contact your doctor immediately. This is rare in adults, but children can be seriously affected if it is part of the croup syndrome.

What is the treatment?

It is wise to stay at home, resting yourself and your voice. Resting your voice involves not talking for long periods, singing, talking loudly or shouting. Use your voice as little as possible and confine yourself to a whisper. Resort to writing notes if it is very troublesome. The more you rest your voice, the quicker you recover.

Most cases require no treatment.

Other helpful hints

- Avoid smoking and passive smoke.
- Avoid drinking alcohol.
- Drink ample fluids, especially water, even if swallowing is uncomfortable.
- Use steam inhalations—5 minutes twice a day or more provides relief. This is preferable to commercial throat sprays and lozenges.
- Hot steamy showers also help.

For significant discomfort, use relieving non-prescriptive drugs such as paracetamol, aspirin or cough syrup. Some people find soluble aspirin gargles soothing.

Do not give aspirin to children under 16 years.

Use of antibiotics

Antibiotics are not used as a rule since laryngitis is usually due to a viral infection and antibiotics do not kill viruses. In rare cases laryngitis may be caused by bacteria and your doctor will prescribe an antibiotic upon diagnosis.

