

Education

Vocal Cord Lesions

What are vocal cord lesions?

Vocal cord lesions are growths or sores on your voice box.

How do they occur?

There are 2 main kinds of vocal cord lesions: growths and leukoplakia.

- Polyps and nodules are growths that may occur in several situations: straining the voice; hypothyroidism; radiation therapy in the neck; or long-lasting sinusitis with drainage, cough, and frequent throat clearing.
- Leukoplakia refers to thick, white patches of abnormal tissue, often caused by chemical irritation from tobacco smoke or alcohol.

Overuse of the voice is a frequent cause of the lesions. A common example of vocal abuse is the frequent loud speaking or yelling used by teachers, coaches, preachers, actors, cheerleaders, and other public speakers. Smoking is another common cause of lesions. Other chemical irritants, such as alcohol, may also contribute to problems.

What are the symptoms?

The first symptom of polyps and nodules is usually hoarseness, which occurs when the growth or growths interfere with the flow of air past the vocal cords.

Leukoplakia commonly causes no symptoms. Over time it can silently develop into cancer of the voice box, especially if you both smoke and drink alcohol.

How are they diagnosed?

Your health care provider will use a viewing instrument with a mirror to examine your vocal cords. The instrument allows your provider to see past the back of the tongue.

If you have leukoplakia, you may have a biopsy of the white patches. For a biopsy your health care provider will take a sample of tissue from the white patches. The tissue will be examined under a microscope and checked for cancer.

How are they treated?

If you have polyps or nodules, your health care provider will advise you to change the way you use your voice and may refer you to a speech therapist.

Some growths require surgical removal. If you have surgery, your provider will give you an anesthetic before the procedure.

If you have leukoplakia, you will be checked for cancer. If you are a smoker, your provider will advise you to stop smoking right away and to rest your voice.

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. Your health care provider 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 your health care provider. In addition:

- Do not smoke and avoid second-hand smoke.
- Rest your voice as much as you can, and avoid situations that strain your voice, such as shouting and cheering at sporting events.

- Use pain relievers and throat sprays as instructed by your health care provider when you must use your voice.

How can I prevent vocal cord lesions?

Avoid smoking, voice abuse, and chemical irritants.

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