

Laryngospasm

This leaflet explains what you can do to manage laryngospasm.

What is laryngospasm?

When we breathe out, air from the lungs passes up the trachea (windpipe) and into the larynx (voice box), where the vocal folds are found. During normal breathing at rest, the vocal folds should remain in an open position.

To produce a voice, the vocal folds come together so that the breath passing through them causes vibration. The vocal folds also come together temporarily when we swallow.

Laryngospasm occurs when the vocal folds in the larynx come together involuntarily, causing the airway to temporarily close. The vocal folds go into spasm, making it feel easier to breathe out, but difficult to get air in.

Spasms start suddenly, although some people report being able to “feel when one is coming on”. They usually last for seconds and less than a minute, but can last longer. They can be extremely frightening for the person and those around them. They may occur any time of day.

Common causes of laryngospasm

Irritants in the airway are the main cause of laryngospasms. Many people report symptoms are worse when they are stressed.

A common trigger of laryngospasm is acid reflux. This is the back flow of acidic stomach contents into the oesophagus (food pipe) and throat.

When the acid reflux remains in the oesophagus, it is called ‘gastro-oesophageal reflux disease’ (GORD). This gives rise to typical symptoms such as heartburn.

When acid reflux reaches as far as the throat, it is known as ‘laryngo-pharyngeal reflux’ (LPR) or ‘silent reflux’. The throat and lungs are more sensitive to stomach acid than the oesophagus, so smaller amounts of reflux into this area can result in more irritation.

Other symptoms of acid reflux may include:

- Hoarse or gravelly voice
- Throat clearing
- Excessive throat mucous
- Post-nasal drip, sinusitis
- Irritable cough
- Sore throat, dry throat
- Bitter, metallic taste in the mouth
- Heartburn
- Hoarse or gravelly voice
- Throat clearing
- Excessive throat mucous
- Ear pain
- Sensation of a ‘lump’ in the throat (Globus)
- Difficulty swallowing
- Nausea
- Choking episodes
- Burping associated with eating
- Unpleasant breath
- Asthma, especially beginning in adulthood

What can I do to manage laryngospasm?

Laryngospasm can feel very frightening, but try to stay calm.

Remember that although it may feel like forever, the spasms do not normally last long and are likely to last less than a minute.

Explain laryngospasm to close family members or friends, so they can remain calm themselves should one arise.

Practise the techniques below, so that you feel confident to use them during a laryngospasm.

Techniques to use during a spasm

Practise these now, so that you can calmly use them during a laryngospasm if needed. You should keep repeating the exercises until the laryngospasm passes. You may find one exercise works better for you than the others.

- 1) Breathe slowly in through your nose... and then slowly out through pursed lips.
- 2) Take 2 sniffs in via your nose... and then breathe slowly out through pursed lips.
- 3) Take 2 sniffs in via your nose...and then breathe slowly out on a “Shshshshshshsh”
(The sniff will open up the vocal cords and the “Sh” helps to keep them open.)
- 4) You need a straw for this one. Breathe slowly in through your nose... and out through a straw.

Reducing the frequency of laryngospasms

- Find ways of effectively managing stress.
- Frequently sip water to help clear irritants from your throat.
- Minimise acid reflux by making lifestyle/diet changes such as eating smaller, more frequent meals; raising the head end of your bed by 10 to 20cm, so your chest and head are above the level of your waist, which can stop stomach acid travelling up towards your throat; trying to lose weight if you're overweight; and trying to find ways to relax, and taking any recommended medications. Your doctor or a speech and language therapist can advise you on this or find more information by visiting www.nhs.uk/conditions/heartburn-and-acid-reflux/.
- You may be advised to take acid-blocking medication (a PPI) or Antacid medications containing alginates (e.g. Gaviscon Advance). Ensure you take the correct dose at the correct time of day.

Contact us

Speech & Language Therapy

Inpatient Therapies Level 1 Battle Block

Royal Berkshire Hospital, London Road, Reading RG1 5AN

Tel: 0118 322 5205 or Email: rbft.speechlanguage@nhs.net

To find out more about our Trust visit www.royalberkshire.nhs.uk

Please ask if you need this information in another language or format.

Caroline Parry, Highly Specialist Speech & Language Therapist, July 2023

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