SYMPTOM

Hoarseness

Hoarseness is a change that makes your voice sound rough, weak, breathy, or strained.

WHAT IT FEELS LIKE
A rough, weak, breathy, or strained voice

WHERE IT IS FELT
Throat and voice box in the neck

MOST COMMON CAUSES
Viral laryngitis, voice overuse, smoke or other irritants

WHEN IT IS URGENT
Breathing difficulty, noisy breathing, drooling, or coughing up blood

USUALLY LASTS
Days to weeks, based on the underlying cause

SEE A DOCTOR IF
Lasting four weeks, or sooner with a neck lump

Overview

Hoarseness means that the sound or quality of your voice has changed. Your voice may become rough, breathy, weak, unusually deep, or difficult to produce. The medical term for this is dysphonia.

Your voice is produced when air moves past the vocal folds inside your larynx, or voice box. Swelling, irritation, muscle tension, growths, or problems with the nerves controlling the vocal folds can change how they vibrate.

Hoarseness is a symptom, not a diagnosis. A short-lived change often follows a cold or heavy voice use. Hoarseness that persists, keeps returning, or occurs with other symptoms may need an examination of the voice box.

What it may feel or look like

Hoarseness can affect the sound, comfort, or strength of your voice. You may notice:

Some people have pain when talking, while others have no throat discomfort. The severity of the sound change does not always show how serious the cause is.

- A raspy, gravelly, breathy, or strained sound
- A quieter voice or difficulty speaking loudly
- A lower or less predictable pitch
- Voice breaks or extra effort when speaking
- Throat discomfort, dryness, or frequent throat-clearing
- Voice tiredness after talking
- Partial or complete loss of your voice

Common causes

Common causes include viral laryngitis, which is inflammation of the voice box during or after a cold. Coughing, shouting, singing, or talking for long periods can also irritate or strain the vocal folds.

Smoke, vaping aerosols, dust, chemical fumes, and dry air may irritate the throat. Allergies and mucus draining down the throat can contribute. Acid reflux may sometimes irritate the voice box, although hoarseness alone does not prove that reflux is the cause.

Less common causes include vocal fold nodules, polyps, or cysts. These are usually non-cancerous changes linked to repeated irritation or voice use. Age-related thinning of the vocal folds can make the voice weaker or breathier.

Some medicines can dry or irritate the throat. Inhaled medicines may also affect the voice. Do not stop a prescribed medicine without discussing it with a healthcare professional.

Other possible causes include thyroid problems, muscle tension around the voice box, vocal fold paralysis, and neurological conditions affecting movement. Previous neck or chest surgery, or a breathing tube used during an operation, can sometimes affect the vocal folds.

Cancer of the voice box is a less common cause. Persistent hoarseness is more concerning when accompanied by a neck lump, coughing up blood, pain when swallowing, unexplained weight loss, or a history of smoking.

When to seek medical care

Call emergency services if hoarseness occurs with:

These symptoms can mean that the airway is becoming narrowed.

Seek same-day medical care if you cough up blood, develop hoarseness after a significant

neck injury, or have severe throat pain with fever and trouble swallowing.

Book a routine appointment if hoarseness lasts four weeks. Arrange an earlier assessment if you have a neck lump, persistent ear or throat pain, painful swallowing, unexplained weight loss, or repeated episodes.

You should also seek earlier advice if the change began after neck or chest surgery, after a breathing tube, or if you smoke or previously smoked. Professional singers, teachers, performers, and others who depend heavily on their voices may benefit from earlier assessment.

- Difficulty breathing or blue or grey lips
- Harsh, high-pitched, or noisy breathing
- Inability to swallow saliva or new drooling
- Rapid swelling of the tongue, lips, face, or throat

How the cause is found

A healthcare professional will ask when the change began and whether it followed a cold, heavy voice use, surgery, or an injury. They may ask about smoking, vaping, medicines, reflux symptoms, swallowing problems, pain, and how your voice changes during the day.

They will usually examine your mouth, throat, and neck. If the hoarseness persists or there are concerning features, you may be referred to an ear, nose, and throat specialist.

The specialist may perform a laryngoscopy. This uses a small flexible camera passed through the nose to view the voice box. A numbing spray may be used. A more detailed test called stroboscopy can show how the vocal folds vibrate.

Scans or a biopsy, which means taking a small tissue sample, may be needed if the examination finds something requiring further investigation. Scans are not usually the first test for hoarseness before the voice box has been viewed.

Treatment and self-care

Treatment depends on the cause. Viral laryngitis usually improves without antibiotics because antibiotics like amoxicillin or doxycycline do not treat viruses.

While your voice recovers:

Whispering can strain the voice because it may make the throat muscles work harder. Avoid

very hot steam, which can cause burns.

Do not assume that reflux medicine will treat unexplained hoarseness. If you also have reflux symptoms, a healthcare professional can help decide whether reflux treatment is appropriate.

Voice therapy with a speech and language therapist can improve problems caused by muscle tension, inefficient voice use, or some vocal fold conditions. Other causes may require treatment of an underlying illness, a change in medication, or surgery.

- Reduce unnecessary talking, shouting, and singing
- Use a comfortable, gentle voice rather than whispering
- Drink enough water to avoid dehydration
- Avoid smoking, vaping, and smoky environments
- Use a humidifier if indoor air is dry
- Limit repeated throat-clearing when possible

What to expect

Hoarseness caused by a cold or brief voice strain often improves over several days to a few weeks. Recovery may take longer if the vocal folds continue to be irritated.

A persistent voice change does not automatically mean that something serious is wrong. However, looking at the vocal folds is important when hoarseness lasts four weeks or when warning signs are present.

If hoarseness keeps returning, note when it occurs and what you were doing beforehand. This can help identify patterns involving voice use, irritants, illness, or medicines.

Common questions

Is hoarseness contagious?

Hoarseness itself is not contagious. If it is caused by a respiratory virus, the infection may spread to other people.

Should I whisper to rest my voice?

No. Whispering can increase muscle tension. Speak less and use a quiet, comfortable voice without forcing it.

Can acid reflux cause hoarseness without heartburn?

It may, but many conditions cause similar voice changes. Hoarseness should not automatically be blamed on reflux, especially when it persists.

Could hoarseness be cancer?

Cancer is one possible but less common cause. Persistent hoarseness needs assessment, particularly if you smoke or have a neck lump, swallowing pain, weight loss, or coughing up blood.

Can children become hoarse from shouting?

Yes. Colds and heavy voice use are common causes in children. Breathing difficulty, noisy breathing, or drooling requires emergency care.

Sources

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