

Patient Information

Cricopharyngeal Spasm

A cause of throat tightness or swallowing discomfort

What is Cricopharyngeal Spasm?

Cricopharyngeal spasm is a condition where a muscle in your throat, called the **cricopharyngeus**, becomes overly tight or goes into spasm. This muscle forms part of the **upper oesophageal sphincter**—the ring of muscle at the top of your food pipe (oesophagus).

When it doesn't relax properly or goes into spasm, it can cause uncomfortable sensations in the throat, especially when swallowing.

What Are the Symptoms?

Common symptoms of cricopharyngeal spasm include:

- **A lump or tight feeling in the throat** (often called *globus sensation*)
- **Discomfort when swallowing**, especially solids
- A feeling of food or pills "**sticking**" in the lower throat
- **Intermittent pain** in the neck or upper chest
- **Frequent throat clearing**
- Occasional **choking** or **coughing** when eating or drinking

The symptoms can come and go and are **not usually dangerous**, but they may feel alarming.

What Causes It?

Cricopharyngeal spasm can be caused or triggered by:

- **Stress or anxiety**
- **Acid reflux (GORD)**
- **Muscle tension** in the neck or throat
- **Age-related changes** in muscle control
- **Post-surgical or post-radiation changes** (rarely)
- **Neurological conditions** (uncommonly)

In many cases, **no clear cause** is found, and the spasm is considered functional.

Is It Serious?

No — while the symptoms can be uncomfortable and distressing, cricopharyngeal spasm is **not harmful** and does **not lead to cancer** or structural damage.

However, it's important to rule out other causes of swallowing difficulty, so you may be referred for further tests.

How is It Diagnosed?

Diagnosis is based on your **symptoms** and a physical **examination**. Your doctor may refer you for tests to rule out other conditions:

- **Flexible nasendoscopy** – a small camera passed through the nose to look at your throat
 - **Barium swallow X-ray** – to assess how you swallow
 - **Swallowing manometry** – a test that measures muscle function in the throat and oesophagus
 - **CT or MRI scan** – in select cases
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How is It Treated?

Most cases are managed **without surgery**. Treatment options include:

1. Reassurance and Lifestyle Changes

- Understanding that the condition is **benign** can reduce anxiety and symptoms
- Eating **slower**, chewing food well, and sipping water with meals may help

2. Speech and Swallowing Therapy

- Specialised **swallowing exercises** and techniques taught by a speech and language therapist can improve control of the muscle and reduce symptoms

3. Treating Acid Reflux

- If reflux is contributing, acid-reducing medication (e.g. omeprazole) and dietary changes may be recommended

4. Botulinum Toxin (BoNT-A) Injection

- In cases that do not respond to conservative measures, a small dose of **Botox can be injected into the cricopharyngeus muscle** to help it relax
- This is usually done through the skin of the neck **with EMG guidance**

- The effects may last several months, and in some cases, symptoms do not return
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When to Seek Help

Contact your doctor if you:

- Have **persistent or worsening symptoms**
- Experience **unintentional weight loss**
- Have **difficulty swallowing liquids**
- Experience **choking** or frequent **chest pain**
- Have **new or unusual voice changes**

These could suggest a different condition that needs further investigation.

Summary

- Cricopharyngeal spasm is a **benign muscle tension** in the throat
 - It can cause **tightness**, **swallowing discomfort**, or a **lump sensation**
 - **Reassurance**, **speech therapy**, and treating **reflux** often help
 - In stubborn cases, **Botox injection** can relieve the spasm
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If you're experiencing throat tightness or swallowing difficulty, speak to your doctor. Help is available — and symptoms can improve with the right support.