

Inducible Laryngeal Obstruction (ILO)

What is Inducible Laryngeal Obstruction (ILO)?

Inducible Laryngeal Obstruction (ILO) is a condition where the airway in the throat (larynx) narrows or closes in response to certain triggers, causing difficulty breathing. Unlike other types of airway obstruction, ILO occurs when the larynx closes up in response to specific stimuli, such as exercise, stress, or exposure to irritants.

It is sometimes referred to as **exercise-induced laryngeal obstruction** or **vocal cord dysfunction**. It can mimic symptoms of asthma, but the causes and treatments are different.

What are the Symptoms of ILO?

The symptoms of ILO can vary from person to person, but they commonly include:

- **Shortness of breath:** Feeling as though you can't breathe or that your throat is tight.
- **Wheezing or stridor:** A high-pitched whistling sound when breathing in or out.
- **Coughing:** A dry, non-productive cough may occur.
- **Throat tightness:** A feeling of tightness or obstruction in the throat or chest.
- **Difficulty during exercise:** Symptoms often worsen with physical activity.
- **Episodes of breathing difficulty:** These can come on suddenly, especially during physical exertion, emotional stress, or exposure to strong smells.

Many people with ILO may have normal lung function tests and no problems when at rest. Symptoms typically worsen with activity or stress.

What Causes ILO?

The exact cause of ILO is not always clear, but it can be triggered by various factors:

- **Physical exertion:** Exercise or heavy physical activity can sometimes trigger symptoms.
- **Stress and anxiety:** Emotional stress or panic attacks can cause the throat to constrict.
- **Environmental triggers:** Exposure to strong odors, smoke, or allergens may provoke symptoms.
- **Respiratory illnesses:** A cold or respiratory infection may sometimes lead to ILO episodes.

- **Hyperventilation:** Breathing too quickly or too deeply can also trigger the condition.

How is ILO Diagnosed?

Diagnosing ILO can be tricky because its symptoms overlap with other conditions, such as asthma. Your doctor will:

1. **Take your medical history:** Ask about your symptoms, triggers, and family history.
2. **Conduct a physical exam:** This will help rule out other conditions.
3. **Perform breathing tests:** To check your lung function (like spirometry).
4. **Laryngoscopy:** In some cases, your doctor may use a small camera to look at the inside of your larynx while you are breathing, especially during an episode of symptoms.
5. **Challenge tests:** These may involve breathing exercises, exercise, or exposure to known triggers to provoke symptoms under controlled conditions.

How is ILO Treated?

Treatment for ILO is aimed at managing symptoms and preventing episodes. There are a variety of strategies that may help:

1. Breathing Techniques

- **Pursed-lip breathing:** This helps slow down your breathing and keep your airways open.
- **Diaphragmatic breathing:** Encourages you to breathe from your diaphragm, helping to relax your throat muscles and reduce tightness.

2. Speech Therapy

- A speech and language therapist (SLT) may teach you techniques to control your vocal cords and breathing patterns. These techniques can help prevent or reduce episodes.

3. Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)

- If anxiety or stress is a trigger, CBT may help you manage emotional responses and reduce the likelihood of episodes.

4. Avoiding Triggers

- Identify and avoid environmental triggers such as strong smells, allergens, or cold air.
- Managing stress through relaxation techniques or regular exercise may also help reduce symptoms.

5. Medications

- While ILO is not treated with the same medications as asthma, sometimes medications used to treat anxiety or respiratory issues, such as inhalers or relaxants, may be prescribed as part of the treatment plan.

6. Exercise Modification

- Gradually increasing physical activity levels and warming up properly before exercise can help reduce the chances of triggering ILO during physical exertion.

Living with ILO

Living with ILO can be challenging, but many people find that with proper treatment and management strategies, they can lead a normal, active life. Here are some tips to help manage the condition:

- **Stay active:** Regular physical activity is important but be mindful of your limits and pace yourself to avoid triggering symptoms.
- **Manage stress:** Practice relaxation techniques like yoga, meditation, or mindfulness to reduce stress and anxiety.
- **Stay informed:** Learning about ILO and understanding your triggers can help you anticipate and manage episodes before they occur.
- **Support system:** Consider joining a support group or speaking with a counsellor if the condition causes anxiety or frustration.

When to Seek Help

If you experience any of the following, it is important to seek medical attention:

- **Severe breathing difficulty** that doesn't improve with breathing techniques.
- **Frequent or worsening episodes** that interfere with your daily life or exercise.
- **Chest pain** or discomfort during an episode.
- **New or unusual symptoms** that you haven't experienced before.

Summary

Inducible Laryngeal Obstruction (ILO) can be distressing, but it is treatable. Working with your healthcare team, you can find the best ways to manage symptoms and improve your quality of life. If you suspect you have ILO or have been diagnosed with it, follow your treatment plan and practice the recommended breathing techniques to gain better control over your condition.

Remember, you are not alone, and with the right support and strategies, you can live an active and fulfilling life.

If you have any questions or concerns about ILO, please speak to your healthcare provider. They can guide you through your treatment options and offer personalised advice.