

Patient Information

Laryngospasm

What is Laryngospasm?

Laryngospasm is a sudden, involuntary spasm (tightening) of the vocal cords that temporarily **blocks airflow into the lungs**, making it difficult to breathe or speak. It can feel frightening, but the episode is **usually brief and not life-threatening**.

What Does It Feel Like?

During a laryngospasm, you may experience:

- Sudden **difficulty breathing in**
- A feeling that your **throat is closing**
- **Noisy breathing** (high-pitched sound or stridor)
- Inability to speak or cry out
- **Coughing** or **choking**
- Feeling **panicked** or anxious during the episode

Most episodes last **less than a minute**, though they may feel much longer.

What Causes Laryngospasm?

Laryngospasm is usually triggered by **irritation or stimulation** of the vocal cords. Common causes include:

- **Gastro-oesophageal reflux (acid reflux)**
- **Post-nasal drip** or mucus in the throat
- **Exposure to irritants** (e.g. smoke, strong smells, cold air)
- **Vocal strain** or excessive throat clearing
- **Anxiety or panic**
- **Infections** such as laryngitis
- After a procedure involving the throat or airway (e.g. intubation, surgery)

Who Can Be Affected?

Laryngospasm can affect both **children and adults**, but it is more common in people with:

- **Reflux disease (GORD)**
- **Asthma**
- **Voice disorders**
- A history of **airway procedures**

Is It Dangerous?

Although it can feel alarming, laryngospasm is **not usually dangerous** and **does not stop oxygen flow completely**. The vocal cords relax again on their own, and normal breathing returns shortly.

In very rare cases (e.g. during anaesthesia), medical treatment may be needed to reopen the airway.

What Should I Do During an Episode?

If you experience a laryngospasm:

- **Try to stay calm** – panic can worsen the spasm
- Take **gentle breaths through your nose** (if possible)
- Try to **sip cold water** or swallow saliva if able
- **Breathe slowly** and sit upright
- Wait – the spasm usually settles within 30–60 seconds

If episodes are **severe or frequent**, seek medical advice.

How is Laryngospasm Diagnosed?

Diagnosis is based on your **symptoms and history**. Your doctor may also:

- Perform a **flexible camera examination** of your throat (nasendoscopy)
- Investigate possible triggers like **acid reflux**, **allergies**, or **airway irritation**

What Are the Treatment Options?

Treatment focuses on **managing the underlying cause** and reducing triggers:

- **Reflux management** – lifestyle changes, antacids or medications
- **Voice therapy** – with a speech and language therapist to reduce tension or throat clearing
- **Avoiding triggers** – such as smoke, strong odours, or cold air
- **Breathing techniques** – to manage anxiety and regain control during episodes

In rare cases, further investigations or procedures may be needed.

When Should I Seek Medical Help?

Contact your doctor if:

- You have **frequent or severe episodes**
- You're unsure if what you're experiencing is laryngospasm
- Your **voice is persistently hoarse** or you have ongoing throat discomfort
- You develop **wheezing, chest tightness, or difficulty breathing between episodes**

Seek urgent medical attention if:

- You experience prolonged difficulty breathing that does not resolve
- You feel faint, turn blue, or cannot get any air in

Summary

Laryngospasm is a sudden, brief spasm of the vocal cords that temporarily affects breathing. It can feel frightening but is rarely dangerous and usually resolves on its own. Managing triggers like **reflux, irritation, or anxiety** can reduce episodes.

Help is available — speak to your doctor if episodes are frequent, severe, or affecting your quality of life.

Further Information

If you have any concerns or need further advice, please contact your healthcare provider.