

Patient Information

Vocal Fold Polyps and Cysts

What are Vocal Fold Polyps and Cysts?

Vocal fold polyps and **cysts** are benign (non-cancerous) growths that develop on the vocal folds (also known as vocal cords). These growths can interfere with the normal vibration of the vocal folds, leading to changes in your voice.

- **Vocal fold polyps** are typically caused by sudden trauma or strain on the vocal folds, such as excessive talking, shouting, or singing. They appear as swollen, fluid-filled lesions.
- **Vocal fold cysts** are fluid-filled sacs that form within the tissue of the vocal folds. Cysts can be caused by glandular blockages or chronic irritation to the vocal folds.

Both conditions can cause hoarseness, vocal fatigue, and other voice-related symptoms, affecting your ability to speak or sing clearly.

Causes of Vocal Fold Polyps and Cysts

Vocal fold polyps and cysts are often the result of vocal strain or irritation. The common causes include:

1. **Excessive vocal strain or overuse:** Frequently shouting, talking loudly for long periods, or singing without proper technique can cause trauma to the vocal folds, leading to polyps or cysts.
 2. **Smoking:** Smoking can irritate the vocal folds, leading to inflammation and increased risk of growths.
 3. **Gastroesophageal reflux disease (GORD):** Acid reflux can irritate the vocal folds, making them more vulnerable to injury and growths.
 4. **Chronic laryngitis:** Ongoing inflammation of the vocal folds, often caused by infections or irritants, can increase the likelihood of developing polyps or cysts.
 5. **Environmental irritants:** Exposure to pollutants, chemicals, or dry air can harm the vocal folds and contribute to growth formation.
 6. **Surgical procedures or trauma:** Previous surgeries on the vocal folds or trauma to the larynx can also lead to the development of polyps or cysts.
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Symptoms of Vocal Fold Polyps and Cysts

Vocal fold polyps and cysts can cause a variety of symptoms, which can range from mild to severe. Common symptoms include:

- **Hoarseness:** A rough, raspy, or breathy voice is one of the most common symptoms.
- **Voice fatigue:** Feeling like your voice becomes tired or weak after speaking or singing for long periods.
- **Difficulty hitting high or low notes:** If you are a singer, you may notice a reduced vocal range.
- **Frequent throat clearing:** A feeling of something in your throat may lead to the urge to clear it often.
- **Throat discomfort:** Some people experience pain or a sensation of something stuck in the throat.
- **Breathiness:** A weak or airy voice may be present, as the vocal folds are not closing properly due to the growth.
- **A change in voice quality after vocal strain:** Symptoms often worsen after speaking or singing for long periods.

Diagnosis of Vocal Fold Polyps and Cysts

If you experience persistent voice changes or symptoms like hoarseness or vocal fatigue, it's important to consult an **ear, nose, and throat (ENT) specialist** or **laryngologist**. The doctor will evaluate your symptoms and typically perform the following diagnostic tests:

1. **Laryngoscopy:** This is the first step in diagnosing vocal fold polyps and cysts. A flexible camera (endoscope) is inserted through the nose or mouth to examine the vocal folds and detect any growths.
2. **Stroboscopy:** This specialized test uses a flashing light to capture the movements of the vocal folds in real time. It helps the doctor assess how well the vocal folds are vibrating and if the growths are affecting their movement.
3. **Voice assessment:** A **speech-language pathologist (SLP)** may evaluate your voice function to determine the extent of the voice changes and assess how the polyps or cysts affect your vocal performance.

Treatment for Vocal Fold Polyps and Cysts

Treatment for vocal fold polyps and cysts is aimed at reducing symptoms, preventing further damage to the vocal folds, and improving voice quality. The treatment options depend on the severity of the condition.

1. Conservative Treatment

For mild cases, treatment may focus on relieving symptoms and promoting healing:

- **Voice rest:** Giving your vocal folds time to rest is essential for recovery. This means reducing speaking, singing, or any activities that put strain on the vocal folds.
- **Hydration:** Drinking plenty of fluids and using a humidifier can help keep your vocal folds moist and reduce irritation.
- **Avoiding irritants:** Minimizing exposure to smoking, alcohol, and environmental pollutants can reduce inflammation and promote healing.
- **Treating GORD:** If acid reflux is contributing to the condition, medications or lifestyle changes to manage reflux may help alleviate symptoms.
- **Voice therapy:** A **speech-language pathologist (SLP)** can work with you to improve your vocal technique, teach proper breathing, and help you develop healthy speaking habits. Voice therapy can also help you avoid further strain on the vocal folds.

2. Surgical Treatment

If conservative measures do not improve the condition, or if the polyps or cysts are large or cause significant voice problems, surgery may be recommended. Surgical options include:

- **Microsurgery:** In this procedure, a surgeon uses small instruments or a laser to remove the polyp or cyst. This is often done under general anesthesia and may require a short recovery time.
- **Vocal fold cyst drainage or removal:** If a cyst is present, it may be drained or surgically removed to restore proper vocal fold function.

Surgery is usually recommended when the polyps or cysts significantly affect voice quality or do not improve with conservative treatment.

Risks and Complications of Treatment

Like any medical treatment, there are risks associated with managing vocal fold polyps and cysts:

- **Voice changes:** Both surgical and non-surgical treatments can result in temporary or permanent changes to the voice, including hoarseness or breathiness.
- **Scarring:** Surgery to remove a polyp or cyst may lead to scarring on the vocal folds, which could affect voice quality.
- **Recurrence:** Without proper vocal care and technique, polyps or cysts may recur, especially if the underlying causes (e.g., vocal strain, smoking, GERD) are not addressed.
- **Incomplete removal:** In rare cases, the entire polyp or cyst may not be removed, requiring further treatment or surgery.

Prevention of Vocal Fold Polyps and Cysts

While vocal fold polyps and cysts cannot always be prevented, the following tips can help reduce the risk of developing them:

- **Use proper vocal technique:** Whether you are speaking or singing, using correct breathing and vocal techniques can reduce strain on your vocal folds.
- **Voice rest:** Avoid overusing your voice. If you talk or sing for long periods, take regular breaks to give your vocal folds time to recover.
- **Stay hydrated:** Drink plenty of water to keep your vocal folds moist and reduce irritation.
- **Avoid smoking and irritants:** Smoking and exposure to pollutants can harm the vocal folds, so avoiding these can help protect your voice.
- **Manage reflux:** If you have gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD), work with your doctor to control it and reduce the risk of vocal fold irritation.

Prognosis

The prognosis for individuals with vocal fold polyps and cysts is generally good with appropriate treatment. Many people experience significant improvement in their voice after voice rest, therapy, and, in some cases, surgery.

With proper care, most people can return to normal vocal function. However, without addressing the underlying causes of polyps or cysts (such as vocal overuse or reflux), there is a risk of recurrence.

When to See a Doctor

If you experience any of the following symptoms, it's important to consult a doctor or ENT specialist:

- **Hoarseness or voice changes** lasting longer than two weeks
- **Voice fatigue** or weakness after speaking or singing
- **Difficulty reaching higher or lower pitches** when singing
- **Frequent throat clearing** or discomfort in the throat
- **Breathiness** or a weak, airy voice

Summary

What are Vocal Fold Polyps and Cysts?	Benign growths on the vocal folds, often caused by vocal strain or irritation
Causes	Vocal overuse, smoking, GERD, environmental irritants, chronic inflammation

What are Vocal Fold Polyps and Cysts?	Benign growths on the vocal folds, often caused by vocal strain or irritation
Symptoms	Hoarseness, voice fatigue, breathiness, reduced vocal range, throat discomfort
Treatment	Voice rest, hydration, voice therapy, surgery (if necessary)
Prevention	Proper vocal technique, voice rest, hydration, avoiding irritants, managing reflux
Prognosis	Positive with treatment, voice therapy, and surgery; recurrence possible without proper care

If you have concerns about your voice or suspect you may have vocal fold polyps or cysts, please speak to your doctor or an ENT specialist. Early diagnosis and treatment can help improve your voice and prevent long-term problems.