



Reflux Laryngitis

Causes

Reflux laryngitis is a voice disorder that results from irritation and swelling of the vocal folds due to the backflow of stomach fluids into the level of the throat. This backflow is called laryngopharyngeal reflux (LPR). Stomach fluids contain acids and enzymes that help digest food in the stomach, but cause problems elsewhere in the esophagus or throat. Reflux disease can be acidic or non-acidic, but both types can produce symptoms.

Symptoms, Signs, and Diagnosis

Swelling and irritation of the voice box caused by stomach fluid backflow into the larynx is associated with a number of common complaints such as hoarseness, feeling of a lump in the throat, postnasal drip, frequent throat clearing, noisy breathing, chronic cough, or sudden difficulty breathing (laryngospasm). These patients do not commonly experience heartburn, which is a typical complaint in backflow of stomach fluids to the esophagus causing inflammation in the esophagus, also known as gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD).

Physicians perform a complete medical history with focus on determining whether risk factors for reflux laryngitis exist. These factors include certain lifestyle habits – intake of certain food and drinks, smoking – and use of certain medications. Levels of patient voice usage in daily life or profession is also an important clue. Examination of the throat and voice box for visible changes consistent with reflux laryngitis can be done in the outpatient visit. Examination may be done by: viewing by way of mirror examination or viewing through special tube-like scopes (rigid laryngoscopy or flexible laryngoscopy). These scopes are small and are passed through the mouth or nose to the back of the throat. They magnify a view of the voice box and can identify changes that typically occur in reflux laryngitis.

Several tests are used to confirm the diagnosis of reflux as the cause of voice disorder or throat complaint: (1) 24-hour pH monitoring, (2) Barium swallow esophagram, (3) Esophagoscopy, (4) Esophageal manometry.

Treatment

There are two main methods of treating voice disorder from stomach fluid backflow (reflux laryngitis), both of which depend on an accurate identification of the cause of the backflow. These include decreasing the production and secretion of stomach acid with medicine and improving the barrier function of the lower esophageal sphincter through surgery.

A treatment trial (empiric therapy) involves a three to six-month period of treatment on anti-reflux medications and precautions. If the voice disorder and/or accompanying complaints decrease or go away with treatment, the identification of reflux laryngitis becomes clear.

There are two main components of empiric therapy.

1. Altering dietary/lifestyle habits to reduce contributing risk factors
2. Taking prescription medications to reduce the production of acid within the stomach to reduce the likelihood of acid backflow to the voice box area.