

ADVICE FOR THOSE WITH VOICE AND THROAT SYMPTOMS, including GLOBUS PHARYNGEUS

The common symptoms of “feeling a lump in the throat” and “constant desire to clear the throat” or need to swallow are often associated with many other throat symptoms and are rarely due to cancers. However if you or your GP feel that your presentation is unusual, and certainly if the following “red flag” symptoms/risk factors are present, then referral to an ENT surgeon for a thorough examination is required to look for a cancer and advise on further treatment:

Absolute red flags:

Dysphagia – food *sticks* on trying to swallow

Weight loss

Persistent hoarse voice for >3 weeks

Neck lump

Persistent sore throat, particularly if to one side.

Relative risks:

Smoking

Age >40

High alcohol intake

Other related common symptoms:

Intermittent hoarse voice

Persistent tickly cough

Dry mouth or throat

Nasty taste in mouth

Feeling of mucus or phlegm in throat

Choking sensation waking you at night

Assuming there are no red flag symptoms and a cancer diagnosis has been ruled out, **these common throat symptoms are a *sensation* that may be due to an “irritated” lining of the throat or muscle spasm in the throat or anxiety.**

An irritated throat may be caused by many factors, including:

Poor diet or poor vocal hygiene.

Reflux of acid and enzymes from the stomach.

Allergies including asthma and allergic rhinitis. The condition itself can cause this but also the inhalers.

Environmental irritants – dust, cleaning fluid fumes, paint aerosols etc.

Infection. It is common that, following an infection, irritation persists due to other factors as above after the infection has cleared.

Treatment therefore is to minimise as many of these irritant factors as possible and always includes improving vocal hygiene. Treatment of laryngopharyngeal reflux is often important also (even if you are not aware this is occurring). It takes up to 2 months for the symptoms of irritated throat to settle with these measures,

Vocal Hygiene Advice

Many throat symptoms can be improved with throat hygiene measures. These reduce the “irritating” effects on the throat of caffeinated drinks, dehydration, smoke and stomach acid.

Your symptoms from the irritated lining of your throat may take 2 months to improve with these measures.

In short, it is important to:

- **Drink plenty of water.** Aim for 8 to 10 glasses per day (¾ to 1 litre)
- **Use Steam inhalations** twice daily or more often to soothe, cleanse and lubricate the throat.
(Boil kettle of water and fill a bowl. Allow water to cool a little so you do not burn yourself. Lean over bowl and place towel over head and bowl. Inhale steam. Do not add any oils/vapours to the water.)
- **Avoid medicated throat lozenges** as these dehydrate and irritate the throat when used often. Instead use steam inhalations and try chewing gum (as below).
- **Avoid caffeinated drinks**, e.g. Coffee, Tea & Cola.
These are dehydrating and irritate the throat. If you must have a coffee or tea, make sure you have a glass of water at the same time.
- **Avoid fizzy/carbonated drinks**
- **Avoid acidic foods**
- **Avoid irritants such as smoking, alcohol, spicy food** and smoky, dusty or dry atmospheres.
- **Chewing gum containing bicarbonate of soda** (sold as tooth whitening gum) may help.
- **Take action to minimise stomach acid production**, which can affect the throat. For example:
 - Avoid fatty foods, e.g. pastries, fast foods.
 - Eat small regular meals.
 - Do not eat late at night, try to eat 2 to 4 hours before going to bed.
- **Avoid excessive coughing and ‘throat clearing’.** The irritation in your throat feels like mucus and coughing/throat clearing may give you temporary relief but it will make your symptoms worse by causing more irritation. Often you can avoid the need to cough by having a sip of water instead or by doing a ‘dry swallow’. You should try this every time you feel the need to cough/throat clear.

Laryngopharyngeal reflux

Most of us are familiar with reflux of stomach contents causing heartburn/indigestion. Also, sometimes acid is felt in the back of the throat with an unpleasant acidic taste.

However, most people who suffer with laryngopharyngeal reflux suffer throat symptoms without heartburn. This is because milder reflux does not cause irritation in the oesophagus but when it gets past the valve in the throat it can affect the lining of the throat that is more sensitive than the oesophagus, giving symptoms of irritation in the throat: a sensation of a lump in the throat, excessive catarrh/mucus, constant throat clearing, recurrent coughing, breathing difficulty, choking episodes, sore throat, and/or hoarse voice. Irritation of the throat occurs due to both acid and enzymes in the reflux. The reflux from the stomach may be fluid or gas (which you may be aware of as belching or even in tiny amounts that do not produce belching).

The following instructions are recommended to reduce reflux and the production of acid, and neutralise stomach acid. Your symptoms from the irritated lining of your throat may take 2 months to improve with these measures; treatment may need to be continued for at least 6 months.

- **Weight and posture**

- If you are overweight your symptoms will be helped if you can reduce weight by careful dieting and taking exercise.
- Avoid slumping, bending or stooping as much as you can, it is better to sit or stand up straight.
- In some individuals, acid reflux occurs more at night while lying flat. Reflux of acid may be reduced by sleeping on a bed that is raised slightly at the head end (pillows will not help since they generally elevate the head only).

- **Diet**

- Avoid eating large meals. It is better to eat smaller more regular meals than one or two large meals a day. Sit up straight during and for a period after eating. Take your evening meal at least two hours before going to bed and try not to eat anything else after this.
- Certain foods may irritate and stimulate acid production. These include caffeinated drinks, 'fizzy' drinks, alcohol, spicy foods, acidic foods (fruit juice, salad dressings) and foods with a high fat content such as pastries, 'fast' food and fried food. You may be aware of other foods that cause you to experience symptoms and these too can be avoided.

- **Smoking**

- Smoking stimulates stomach acid production and reflux, in addition to directly irritating the throat, and therefore you should try to give up.

- **Medicines which reduce acid reflux**

- Available 'over the counter' at your chemists:
 - Gaviscon advance (licensed for the treatment of laryngopharyngeal reflux)
 - Zantac/Ranitidine
- There are many other medicines available and the Pharmacist will be able to advise you.
- Other medicines available on prescription from your Doctor.
 - Proton Pump Inhibitors (PPIs)
e.g. Lansoprazole/Zoton; Omeprazole/Losec; Rabeprazole/ParietProkinetics
 - Prokinetics
e.g. Metoclopramide, domperidone.

Studies have shown that for patients with throat symptoms (rather than just heartburn), medicines work best when taken regularly. They also take 2 months to relieve throat symptoms.