

Department of Speech and Language Therapy

Vocal cord paralysis

This leaflet has been written to try to help you understand some of the symptoms you have been experiencing, and answer some of the questions that you may have about your voice problems.

What is vocal cord paralysis?

Vocal fold paralysis (complete absence of movement) is the inability to move the vocal cords. Vocal cords can either be partially or completely paralysed and it may affect only one or both of the cords.

What are the causes of vocal cord paralysis?

Vocal cord paralysis may result from:

- A viral infection
- Stroke
- Trauma to the head
- Damage between the nerves and muscles within the larynx (voice box) following surgery or cancer to the head, neck, or chest region
- However, sometimes the cause may be unknown

What are the symptoms of vocal cord paralysis?

Vocal cord paralysis produces several symptoms and their severity depends on whether one or both of the vocal cords are affected, and/or the position which the folds are paralysed in.

Changes to your voice:

- Your voice may sound breathy and weak however if both vocal cords are affected you may lose your voice completely.
- The tone of your voice may become variable.
- The loudness of your voice may decrease.
- You may find it difficult or effortful to make yourself heard in a noisy environment.

Other symptoms:

- You may experience difficulty swallowing or a sensation that food/drink is going down the 'wrong way'
- You may experience difficulty breathing and as a result you may feel breathless or your breathing may become noisy.

How will my diagnosis be confirmed?

You will be seen by a member of the Ear, Nose and Throat (ENT) team who will examine you and look at how the vocal cords are working. A speech and language therapist may also be present and assist in the diagnosis.

What treatment is available for vocal cord paralysis?

Some paralysed vocal cords will recover by themselves within several months. However, there is a possibility that the paralysis may be permanent. Treatment choices depend on the nature of the paralysis as well as the cause and your voice needs.

Speech therapy and surgery are the two common treatment options. Sometimes speech therapy may be used before or after surgery or sometimes as the sole treatment. Your ENT doctor and Speech and Language Therapist will be able to give you advice on the best options for you.

What can I do to help my symptoms?

Following any exercises and advice given by the ENT team or your Speech and Language Therapist is very important if you want to help your symptoms improve.

Consult your doctor if you find that you are experiencing breathing and swallowing difficulties so they can advise you on treatment options. If you have any other questions about the vocal cord paralysis please call your speech and language therapist 01223 216200 or doctor who will be happy to help.



We are currently working towards a smoke-free site. Smoking is only permitted in the designated smoking areas.

For advice and support in quitting, contact your GP or the free NHS Stop Smoking helpline on 0800 169 0 169

Help with this leaflet:



If you would like this information in another language, large print or audio format, please ask the department to contact Patient Information: 01223 216032 or

patient.information@addenbrookes.nhs.uk



Document history

Authors	Speech and Language Therapy
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