

# Vocal Cord Dysfunction

### What is vocal cord dysfunction?

It is when your vocal cords partly close while you are breathing. This may cause sudden, severe shortness of breath, tightness in your throat, or trouble speaking. Vocal cord dysfunction can sometimes be mistaken for asthma.

### What causes it?

Many things can cause this problem. It may happen when you breathe in dry, cold air or air that has irritants in it. These may include dust, workplace chemicals, or ammonia. Other possible causes/triggers include acid reflux, asthma, postnasal drip, recent upper respiratory tract infection, stress/anxiety, and exercise. Some people are more sensitive to these things than others.

### How do I know if I have it?

There are two tests your doctor can do. One is nasolaryngoscopy (nay-zoe-lar-in-GOS-coh-pee). Your doctor will pass a small, flexible tube through your nose to look at your vocal cords while you breathe. This test will help your doctor know whether your vocal cords are working right.

The second test is a pulmonary function test to see how well your lungs are working. For this test, you

blow hard into a machine that measures the speed and amount of air moving in and out of your lungs. This test is useful in telling the difference between vocal cord dysfunction and asthma.

### How is it treated?

You should avoid anything that may be causing your symptoms (for example, smoke, dust, or other irritants). Your doctor may also prescribe medicine to reduce stomach acid, lower anxiety, or control allergies.

If you keep having symptoms, your doctor may suggest that you see a speech therapist. The therapist can teach you how to breathe more easily and help you relax.

### Where can I get more information?

Your doctor

American Thoracic Society

<https://www.thoracic.org/patients/patient-resources/resources/vocal-cord-dysfunction.pdf>  
<https://www.thoracic.org/patients/patient-resources/resources/eilo.pdf>

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This handout is provided to you by your family doctor and the American Academy of Family Physicians. Other health-related information is available from the AAFP online at <https://familydoctor.org>.

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