

## Irritable Larynx Syndrome (ILS)

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Irritable Larynx Syndrome (ILS) is a condition where the larynx (voice box) becomes hypersensitive to an array of stimuli leading to any combination of the following complaints not derived from a specific disease:

- Chronic cough or throat clearing
- Feeling of lump or some other sensation in the throat
- Throat irritation or burning sensation
- Tightness of throat or neck
- Effort or pain with swallowing
- Sensation of difficulty inhaling
- Tightening of throat causing choking or difficulty inhaling



### What causes ILS?

ILS works in the same way as a mosquito bite: scratching it feels better for a few moments, but in the long run scratching actually makes the itch worse. In the same way, when individuals experience mild irritation in their throats "scratching the itch" (throat clearing) provides momentary relief, but over time the irritation worsens and milder symptoms can become more severe. Chronic, or long-term, irritation of the mucosa in the laryngeal area can cause changes to the nerve pathways; making them hyper-excitable, so that it only takes a small irritation to have a large sensory response (like a cough).

### Are there common "irritants" that might lead to ILS?

Here are some possible irritants that can start the chain reaction:

- ◆ Upper respiratory infection with cough
- ◆ Reflux
- ◆ Post Nasal Drainage
- ◆ Allergens (e.g. mold, pollen, dander)
- ◆ Cigarette smoke
- ◆ Odors (e.g. perfume, hairspray)
- ◆ Food sensitivities
- ◆ Harsh chemicals/cleaners
- ◆ Cold Air or Hot/humid air
- ◆ Strong Emotions (e.g. anxiety, stress)
- ◆ Hyperfunction of the muscles of the vocal mechanism.

### How is ILS diagnosed?

Your ENT physician will perform a comprehensive history and detailed exam of your larynx. Specific medical therapy may be recommended. Often your ENT will determine that additional evaluation with our speech-language pathologist would be beneficial. This functional evaluation will determine whether there are behavioral or lifestyle factors that are contributing to the symptoms. Once completed your ENT and speech-language pathologist will work as a team to provide the best plan of therapy.

### How is ILS treated?

Treatment of ILS addresses the cause of irritation. This can include:

- ◆ **Treatment of Acid Reflux.** This may include: Medications (what your ENT prescribes), Dietary Precautions (what you eat and what

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supplements you take), Lifestyle Precautions (when you eat, avoiding environmental irritants), and Mechanical Precautions (how much pressure you put on your lower esophageal sphincter).

- ◆ **Functional Speech Therapy with a Speech-Language Pathologist (SLP).** Your SLP will educate you about the disorder, help you improve the environment of your laryngeal mucosa to reduce irritation, improve the movement and function of your larynx, and help reduce muscle tension and restore muscle balance. An important part of treatment is teaching you techniques and strategies to avoid or suppress the cough or throat-clearing.
- ◆ **Further medical treatment** is sometimes used to restore the medical

basis for normal function and sensation. Your ENT will discuss these possibilities if they are relevant.

- ◆ **Treatment of environmental allergens or triggers.** Identifying allergens is critical to maintaining a healthy throat. Our experienced and knowledgeable allergy staff can perform testing to identify what may be causing your symptoms. Your ENT will review this testing and give options for avoidance measures or allergy therapy to reduce the throat irritation.

## Why can chronic coughing and throat clearing be harmful?

A cough is produced by squeezing the vocal folds together, building up pressure in the lungs, and then quickly forcing the vocal folds open to clear away

whatever might be getting too close to our airway. This can be traumatic to the vocal folds, irritating them in the same way that our hands would be irritated if they were being clapped together over and over.

Coughing for a long period of time can cause the mucosa of the larynx and vocal folds to become hypersensitive, making it feel like something is threatening the airway. more coughing or throat clearing.

The vocal folds feel the need to cough or throat clear even when there isn't an actual physical threat to the airway. The chronic coughing or throat clearing results in even more coughing or throat clearing.

*SOURCE: Department of Otolaryngology—Head and Neck Surgery / University of Minnesota*

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