

# About Laryngeal Cancer

## A Quick Guide

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This is a brief summary of 'About laryngeal (voice box) cancer' from our website. You will find more detailed information on there. In this information there are sections on

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- Types of laryngeal cancer
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- What to ask your doctor

You can view this information in a larger print on our website.

### The larynx

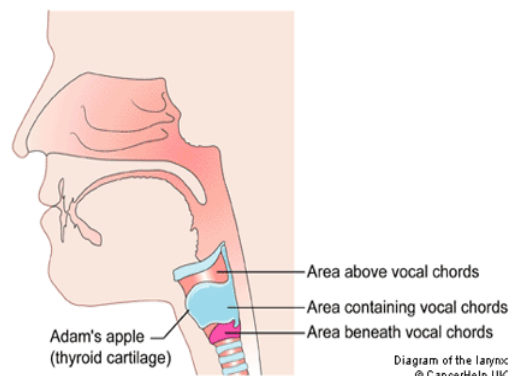
The larynx is another name for the voice box. It is a tube about 2 inches (5cm) long in adults. The larynx sits above the windpipe (trachea) in the neck, in front of the upper part of the food pipe (pharynx).

The larynx is where the breathing and digestive systems separate. When you breathe in, air travels through your mouth, larynx, windpipe (trachea), and then into your lungs. When you swallow, a part of the larynx called the epiglottis closes tightly over your airway. This stops food and saliva going into your lungs. When the epiglottis is closed, food and drink can go down your food pipe and into your stomach.

The vocal cords are two bands of muscle that form a V shape inside the larynx. These vibrate together when air passes between them. This produces the sound of your voice.

### The parts of the larynx

The larynx is made of several pieces of a smooth, shiny tissue called cartilage. The cartilage is surrounded by fibrous tissue. The largest cartilage of the larynx is the Adam's apple. The proper name for this is the thyroid cartilage.



### The lymph nodes

Like all other parts of the body, the area around the larynx contains lymph nodes. These are often removed during cancer surgery and examined to see if they contain any cancer cells.

### **Risks and causes of laryngeal cancer**

Cancer of the larynx is rare in the UK. It is much more common in men than women. There are very few cases in people under 40 years of age. We don't know the exact causes of laryngeal cancer, but there are several factors that can increase the risk of developing it.

### **Alcohol and smoking**

Smoking tobacco and drinking a lot of alcohol are the main risk factors for cancer of the larynx. If you smoke and drink regularly, you have a higher than average risk of developing cancer of the larynx.

### **Other risk factors**

Having a first degree relative diagnosed with head and neck cancer can increase the risk and so can having poor immunity.

HPV stands for human papilloma virus (HPV). There are many types of HPV. Some can affect the lining of the larynx and slightly increase the risk of laryngeal cancer.

Some chemicals can increase your risk of cancer of the larynx. You may have an increased risk if you have regularly been exposed over some years to high levels of wood dust, soot or coal dust, or paint fumes.

A poor diet may also increase your risk. Stomach acid coming back up the oesophagus (acid reflux) can irritate and damage the larynx, which may also increase laryngeal cancer risk

### **Symptoms of laryngeal cancer**

If you have a hoarse voice for 3 weeks or more, it could be a sign of cancer of the larynx. Hoarseness is one of the most common symptoms. It is much more likely to be caused by something other than cancer, like an infection or smoking. But your GP should refer you to see a specialist for an internal examination of your larynx.

### **Difficulty in swallowing**

This can vary from a feeling that there is a crumb stuck in your throat to being completely unable to swallow food. You may have some pain or a burning sensation when swallowing food. Or you may feel that your food is sticking.

### **Other symptoms**

Other symptoms of cancer of the larynx can include:

- A feeling that there is a lump in your throat
- A cough or shortness of breath
- Bad smelling breath (halitosis)
- Weight loss
- An ear ache that doesn't go away (this is rare)

Remember that all these symptoms can be caused by other illnesses. But it is important to report them to your doctor.

### **Screening for cancer of the larynx**

Screening means testing people for early stages of cancer before they have any symptoms. Before screening for any type of cancer can be carried out, doctors must have an accurate test to use. The test must be reliable in picking up cancers that are there. And it must not give a false diagnosis of cancer in people who do not have cancer. A result that appears positive when it is negative is called a false positive result.

At the moment, there is no screening test in the UK reliable enough to find early cancer of the larynx. Cancer of the larynx is also relatively uncommon. It would cost a lot of money to test everyone for a disease that a very few people get.

### **If you have symptoms**

If you have symptoms, you can see your GP who can refer you to a hospital specialist. Many hospitals have set up rapid access clinics for people with a long lasting hoarse voice. If you are worried, your GP can refer you to one of these clinics, so that you can be seen as quickly as possible.

### **Types of laryngeal cancer**

More than 90 out of every 100 cancers of the larynx (90%) are squamous cell cancer. The cancer develops in the flat, skin like, squamous cells that cover the surface of the epiglottis, vocal cords and other parts of the larynx.

### **Adenocarcinoma**

Adenocarcinoma is uncommon compared to squamous cell laryngeal cancer. It starts in the gland cells (adenomatous cells) that are scattered around the surface of the larynx. These cells produce mucus.

### **Sarcoma**

Sarcomas are cancers that start in the body's supporting tissues (connective tissues). Cartilage is the supporting tissue of the larynx. Cancers that develop from cartilage are called chondrosarcomas. Sarcomas of the larynx are extremely rare.

### **Other types of cancer found in the larynx**

Very rarely, other types of cancer are first diagnosed in the larynx. It is possible to get lymphoma or plasmacytoma (a type of myeloma) in the larynx. If this is the case you need to go to the section about the type of cancer you have. Your treatment will be completely different to that for laryngeal cancer.

### **Non cancerous growths in the voice box**

Many diseases of the larynx are not cancer. Growths that are not cancer are called benign. They can cause similar symptoms to laryngeal cancer.

### **Should I see a laryngeal cancer specialist?**

It can be very difficult for GPs to decide who may have a suspected cancer and who may have something more minor. But there are particular symptoms that could be due to a laryngeal cancer. The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) has produced guidelines to help GPs decide which patients need to be seen urgently by a specialist. GPs are urged to take particular notice of symptoms in smokers over 50 and in heavy drinkers. It is important to remember that

- Between 80 and 90 out of every 100 people diagnosed with laryngeal cancer (80 to 90%) develop a hoarse voice
- Difficulty and pain when swallowing are also common
- Laryngeal cancer is rare, with very few cases in people under 40

### **Who needs to see a specialist urgently**

Your GP should consider referring you to a specialist if you are aged 45 or over with

- Persistent unexplained hoarseness in your voice
- An unexplained lump in the neck

You should get an appointment within 2 weeks for an urgent referral. There are now rapid access clinics for hoarse voice in many hospitals. These have been set up so that you can get an appointment more quickly.

## What to ask your doctor about laryngeal cancer

- How will I know if I have cancer of the larynx?
- Am I more likely to get cancer of the larynx than anyone else?
- Does drinking or smoking increase my risk of cancer of the larynx?
- I used to smoke - does this mean I will get cancer of the larynx?
- How can I give up smoking?
- What is a safe amount of alcohol to drink each week?
- Does my diet affect my risk of cancer of the larynx?
- I get a lot of acid indigestion- is this a sign of cancer of the larynx?
- I am exposed to soot (diesel fumes/metal dust) at work. Does this affect my risk of cancer of the larynx?
- I worked with asbestos for many years. Does this affect my risk of cancer of the larynx?
- Can I be screened for cancer of the larynx?

**For more information**, visit our website <http://www.cruk.org/about-cancer>

You will find a wide range of detailed, up to date information for people affected by cancer, including a clinical trials database that you can search for trials in the UK. Our information is based on the best current scientific evidence and reviewed regularly by leading clinicians and experts in health and social care.

For answers to your questions about cancer call our Cancer Information Nurses on 0808 800 4040 9am till 5pm Monday to Friday.

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