

University of Kentucky Health Column: When to seek help for frequent throat-clearing

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“Ahem!” Clearing your throat occasionally can be a simple way to get someone’s attention. However, when it happens repeatedly, it may be a sign of chronic throat clearing.

Chronic throat clearing is a common problem that may be associated with a throat tickle, dry cough or the sensation of a “lump” in the throat. When throat clearing is persistent, it may require medical evaluation.

In general, chronic throat clearing is usually the result of hypersensitivity in the larynx (voice box) and pharynx (throat). Clearing your throat is usually your body’s response to this irritation and an effort to remove the irritation by rubbing your vocal folds (vocal cords) together. Chronic throat clearing often creates more irri-

tation to the vocal folds because of the harsh contact, resulting in a cycle of frequent, persistent throat clearing.

Chronic throat clearing can be frustrating and difficult to ignore. Understanding what it is — and what may be causing it — is the first step toward relief.

What is chronic throat clearing?

Often, patients with chronic throat clearing describe a sensation of mucus in the throat and clear their throat in an attempt to get rid of it. Throat clearing may occur a few times per day, several times per hour or only after meals.

It may also be accompanied by symptoms such as:

- A throat tickle
- Dry cough
- Hoarseness
- The sensation of a “lump” in the throat
- When throat clearing becomes frequent, medical evalu-

ation may be needed.

Why does throat clearing become a problem?

One of the most important things to understand about chronic throat clearing is that it often becomes cyclical.

A patient may initially clear their throat because there truly is something irritating the vocal cords. Throat clearing may briefly relieve this irritation.

However, frequent throat clearing can inflame the delicate tissues of the vocal cords. The body then senses this inflammation as a new irritant and responds by clearing the throat again, creating an ongoing cycle.

Chronic throat clearing is often related to irritable larynx syndrome, an umbrella term used to describe hypersensitivity of the voice box, or larynx. A helpful way to think about this condition is

like a car alarm. You want your car alarm to go off if someone is trying to break into the car — but not when a leaf falls on it. Similarly, throat clearing is meant to protect the airway when something dangerous is present, such as food or liquid about to enter the lungs.

With irritable larynx syndrome, the throat may overreact to minor triggers like saliva, dust or smoke.

Common causes of chronic throat clearing

The causes of chronic throat clearing vary from person to person and should be determined through medical evaluation. Common contributors may include:

- Acid reflux
- Postnasal drip
- From allergies or sinus conditions
- Vocal cord irritation or lesions
- Neurologic conditions, such as tics

Side effects of certain medications Because these causes differ greatly, a comprehensive evaluation is important to determine the most appropriate treatment.

How is chronic throat clearing evaluated and treated?

Diagnosis often begins with a primary care provider or allergist. If typical treatments for allergies or reflux are not successful, referral to an ear, nose and throat (ENT) physician may be recommended, along with evaluation by a speech-language pathologist who specializes in voice and swallowing disorders.

If empiric reflux medication prescribed by a primary care provider does not improve symptoms, further evaluation may help determine whether reflux is truly the cause. This may include a laryngoscopy, in which a

thin, flexible camera is passed through the nose to examine the throat and vocal cords. Signs of reflux-related irritation can sometimes be seen during this exam.

Treatment options may include: Prescription medications

Dietary changes, such as avoiding trigger foods

Lifestyle modifications, including elevating the head of the bed

Alginate therapy, a liquid taken after meals that forms a raft-like barrier on top of stomach contents to help prevent reflux from reaching the throat

Voice therapy, when hoarseness or voice changes are present

Treatment recommendations depend on the underlying cause. This week’s column is by Dr. Rachel Jonas, an otolaryngologist at the University of Kentucky Ear, Nose & Throat Clinic.

It’ll never start, it’ll never start

When Robert Fulton unveiled his new invention, the steamboat, a host of naysayers gathered on the riverbank yelling, “it’ll never start, it’ll never start.” Fulton quieted the crowd when, after a lot of clunking and groaning, the boat began moving down the river. It wasn’t long, however, before his critics joined together and broke the silence, hollering, “it’ll never stop, it’ll never stop.”

You’re setting yourself up for a huge disappointment if you think you can go through life without encountering criticism. In an attempt to feel better about themselves, frustrated people compensate by condemning others, especially in today’s divisive society.

Someone once said he didn’t know the secret to success, but did know the secret to failure: trying to please everyone. A tragic example of this took place just days before Jesus’ crucifixion. Preaching to the crowd, Christ proclaimed, “And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to Myself” (John



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12:32 NASB). In other words, He would soon die on the cross, shedding His precious blood so that our sins would be forgiven. He went on to say, “While you have the Light, believe in the Light, so that you may become sons of Light” (John 12:26 NASB).

Many of those present, even the religious leaders among them, believed Jesus and were ready to follow Him. Sadly, however, they weren’t willing to follow through for fear of being thrown out of the synagogue. Rather ironic isn’t it? They failed to follow the Bridegroom of the church because they were afraid of being banned from their church. As the Bible says, “They loved the approval of people rather than the approval of God” (John 12:43 NASB).

As David prepared to take on Goliath, his angry brother Eliab belittled him for leaving

his sheep and coming to the battlefield. King Saul told him he was too young. Goliath mocked him, questioning, “Am I a dog that you come to me with sticks? Come to me, and I will give your flesh to the birds of the sky and the beasts of the field” (1 Samuel 17:43,44 NASB). Guided by God and ignoring their objections, David slung a single stone into the forehead of the giant, killing him on the spot.

If you’ve inquired of the Lord and feel strongly about your position, don’t let weak minded critics get you down. The cold water committee is always going to show up to steal your joy and rob you of your dream. Along with the apostle Paul, proclaim, “I can do all things through Him (Christ) who strengthens me” (Philippians 4:13).

An old Aesop fable tells about an elderly man and his grandson who came into town on a donkey. The grandfather sat the lad on the donkey until he heard the people object, “Look at that selfish child making that old man walk!”

The old man couldn’t take his grandson being criticized, so he had the boy walk while he rode. Soon the people said, “Look at that selfish old man riding and making that poor little boy walk.” So, he climbed off and they both walked. Then the crowd murmured, “Look at those stupid people. They have

a donkey and they’re not even using it.” Then they rode together, only to have the onlookers say, “Look at those cruel people abusing that poor animal! They’re going to break his back with that load!” Finally they walked into town carrying the donkey!

You’ll know you achieved a break-

through in your walk with Christ when pleasing God takes precedence over satisfying people. As the Word says, “The fear of man brings a snare, but he who trusts in the Lord will be exalted” (Proverbs 29:25).

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