

Vocal Cord Dysfunction (VCD)

Vocal cord dysfunction (VCD) is a disorder of the vocal cords (or vocal folds). When a patient experiences VCD, the vocal cords adduct (come together) during inspiration when they should abduct (spread apart). Smooth movement of air into and out of the chest is obstructed and it is harder to breathe. During VCD episodes patients feel anxious, helpless, or terrified. Patients typically feel as if they can't breathe. Some patients feel faint. The exact cause of VCD remains unknown.

Symptoms that commonly occur during VCD include:

- Wheezing (a whistling sound typically from the neck)
- Shortness of breath
- Hoarseness
- Audible breathing (stridor)
- Throat or chest tightness

Triggers of VCD include:

- Exercise
- Coughing
- Acid reflux (GERD)
- Breathing cold air
- Breathing irritants (tobacco smoke, pollution, strong odors etc.)
- Stress (emotional and psychosocial issues)

VCD verses Asthma

VCD may mimic or coexist with asthma. Symptoms and triggers of VCD can overlap with those of asthma. Correct diagnosis is important since asthma medication will have little or no effect on symptoms caused by VCD and may even make symptoms worse. Patients who have VCD along with asthma will frequently find that their usual asthma therapy is no longer as effective at preventing breathing difficulties or that asthma "rescue medication" no longer works.

Diagnosis

Correct diagnosis is important. The diagnosis of VCD is made based on history, physical examination, and testing. Testing to evaluate asthma is important. Your doctor may recommend special testing to determine if you have asthma, VCD, or both. These tests may include pulmonary function tests, exercise challenge, a methacholine challenge, fiber optic laryngoscopy to examine the vocal cords, and/or an ENT (Ears, Nose, and Throat) physician evaluation.

Treatment

- Voice therapy - the hallmark of treatment for most patients. This includes learning new breathing patterns - particularly during an episode, relaxation techniques and vocal hygiene.
- Trigger avoidance
- Reflux treatment
- Vocal cord hygiene – this includes staying hydrated, limit drying agents like caffeine and alcohol, avoid straining your voice, and rest

When patients are diagnosed with VCD, with or without asthma, they can be surprised, upset, or frustrated. However, with proper diagnosis, correct treatment can be started. Speech therapy is the retraining of the vocal cords to function properly. Speech therapy is generally needed for a brief number of visits, after which many people experience marked improvement or a complete cure. A psychological evaluation can also be helpful for some patients since stress can be a major component in this disorder. Although this disorder is not psychological (in a patient's head), psychotherapy can help patients with VCD by providing counseling and by determining if stress is an important part of the problem.

Speech therapists vary in their ability to treat VCD. It is important to see a speech therapist knowledgeable in this disorder. Listed below are names of speech therapists that are knowledgeable and have treated patients with VCD.

Brianne Q. Lay, M.A., CCC-SLP	Denver	303-996-6510
Rosanne Pash	Denver	303-320-2818
Elizabeth Martinson	Denver	303-429-4031
Denver Speech & Language	Denver	303-996-6510
Speech & Language Stimulation Center	Fort Collins	970-495-1150
Jody Heatherly	Greeley	970-352-5356
Dr. Jeff Steffen	Littleton	303-794-4900
Janelle Jander	Littleton	303-908-3883

Insurance companies vary greatly in coverage for speech therapy and for treatment by a particular speech therapist. You must determine your insurance coverage for these disorders and which speech therapists are on your insurance plan. If you do not have coverage for this treatment, it is recommended that you consider paying “out of pocket.” Fortunately, most patients only need a few visits, so the total cost of treatment usually is not prohibitively expensive.