

MEDfacts

An Educational Health Series From National Jewish Health®



Exercise-induced laryngeal obstruction (EILO)

In 1983, doctors at National Jewish described a condition that may mimic asthma. This condition is called **vocal cord dysfunction**. A few years later, a similar condition occurring primarily during exercise was described. Today, this variant of vocal cord dysfunction is known as exercise-induced laryngeal obstruction (EILO).

What are the symptoms of EILO?

Symptoms of EILO can include:

- Shortness of breath during high-intensity exercise
- Stridor (noisy breathing) during exercise
- Frightening difficult breathing
- Chest and/or throat tightness
- "Just having trouble getting air in."

What happens with EILO?

To understand EILO, it is helpful to understand how the vocal cords function. The vocal cords are located at the top of the windpipe (trachea) and vibrate to produce noise and voice. Breathing during exercise causes the vocal cords to open, allowing air to flow through the windpipe (trachea) and into the lungs. During episodes of EILO, the vocal cords constrict partially. This leaves a restricted opening for air to flow through the windpipe and causes shortness of breath. Although it is frequent confused with asthma, it is a completely separate problem.

What can trigger EILO symptoms?

Usually EILO is triggered only during high-intensity exercise. Some people can experience similar symptoms at other times (including low-intensity exercise and during exposure to irritating smells).

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How is EILO diagnosed?

Making a diagnosis of EILO can be **very** difficult. If your doctor suspects EILO, you will be asked many questions about your symptoms. Breathing tests like spirometry can be useful in diagnosing EILO, but only if they are done when symptoms are occurring. They are also helpful in the search for other explanations of symptoms. Laryngoscopy can be useful in diagnosing VCD and EILO, but generally only if it is done when symptoms are occurring. It is now possible to perform laryngoscopy simultaneous to the introduction of triggers that are specifically problematic to someone. National Jewish Health is one of a few centers in the world that can readily perform **continuous laryngoscopy during exercise**, a procedure which enables the visualization of the upper airway during intense exercise. This test is the most advanced test used in the evaluation of EILO.

How is EILO treated?

Once diagnosed with EILO, a specific treatment program can begin. There are special exercises and therapies that help control symptoms.

- Speech therapy is a very important part of the treatment for EILO. In speech therapy you will learn exercises to increase your awareness of abdominal breathing and relax your throat muscles. This enables you to have more control over your vocal cords and throat. The medical team will treat other conditions with medications (allergies, asthma, etc.). Since EILO is a separate diagnosis from asthma, its symptoms do not improve or only minimally improve with asthma medications alone.
- Another important part of treatment is supportive counseling or performance psychology, which can help you identify and deal positively with stress that may be an underlying factor in EILO.

The Role of National Jewish Health

Doctors, speech-language pathologists and researchers at National Jewish Health are continuing to discover more about EILO, a condition that may mimic asthma. In addition, National Jewish Health offers a variety of programs that can help people with known or suspected EILO. Doctors and a team of specialists can work together to evaluate your condition and determine the best treatment program. National Jewish Health's long-standing intensive specialization in respiratory diseases has been instrumental in our success in treating this medical condition.

Note: This information is provided to you as an educational service of National Jewish Health LUNG LINE® (1-800-222-LUNG).

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