Vocal Cord Nodules (Screamer's Nodes)

Vocal cord nodules are the most common cause of prolonged hoarseness in children. Caused by repeatedly overusing or misusing the voice, they are sometimes called "screamer's nodes" or "singer's nodes." The nodules usually go away, and the voice returns to normal after the patient stops abusing his or her voice. Speech therapy (voice therapy) can be helpful.

What are vocal cord nodules and what do they look like?

Vocal cord nodules are swollen or hardened areas that develop on the edges of the vocal cords. They are caused by excessive yelling, screaming, or other forms of overusing the voice. For example, vocal cord nodules may result from excessive crying in infants, in toddlers from tantrums or screaming fits, and in teenagers from cheerleading or singing in a rock band. One episode of screening can irritate the vocal cords. However, for nodules to develop, the abuse must be repeated over a long time.

The nodules cause the voice to become hoarse or rough. It may be hard for your child to speak in a normal voice. Usually the damaged area will heal if the voice is allowed to rest and the misuse is stopped. Other treatments may be recommended, but surgery is rarely needed.

What are some possible complications of vocal cord nodules?

- Usually none. In infants and toddlers, the problem generally resolves as the child grows and the bad voice habits go away.

- However, if your child continues abusing his or her voice, the problem is likely to continue. In some cases, vocal cord damage requires special treatment.

- There is a risk that the nodules will come back after treatment, especially if the harmful voice habits are not corrected.

What increases your child's risk of vocal cord nodules?

Besides overusing the voice, other factors may increase the risk of vocal cord nodules:

- Smoking, or exposure to second-hand smoke.

- Gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD): damage to the vocal cords caused by stomach acid.

How are vocal cord nodules diagnosed?

- Any child (or adult) with hoarseness lasting longer than 2 weeks should be examined by a doctor. There are other possible causes of hoarseness.

- The doctor usually makes the diagnosis by asking about overuse of the voice. If there's any doubt, or if treatment doesn't solve the problem, we may recommend a visit to a doctor specializing in ear, nose, and throat problems (an otorhinolaryngologist, or ENT).

  - The ENT doctor can examine the vocal cords using an instrument called a laryngoscope. If vocal cord nodules are present, the doctor can see how severe they are and recommend proper treatment.

How are vocal cord nodules treated?

- If vocal cord nodules are present, the first step is *resting the voice!* Your child will need to stop whatever habits are irritating the vocal cords, especially yelling and screaming. In many cases, your child's voice will improve after a few weeks' rest.

- For younger children, behavioral therapy may be needed. This involves rewarding and praising your child for not carrying out the behaviors that are irritating the vocal cords, like screaming and shouting. Younger children usually outgrow the behavior causing vocal cord nodules. Talk to your doctor if you need help handling temper tantrums.

- For children who are old enough to cooperate, voice therapy is helpful. This is usually done by a speech therapist, who can teach your child proper techniques of speaking to correct the harmful habits that led to vocal cord nodules. This type of therapy is especially helpful for singers, actors, or others who use their voices a lot.

- If any contributing factors are present (such as GERD), treatment may help to improve the voice problem as well.

● Rarely, surgery may be needed to remove the nodules that are causing voice changes. This is sometimes done with the use of lasers. After the operation, your child will need voice therapy.

When should I call your office?

Call our office if your child's hoarseness doesn't get better after a few weeks of resting the voice, or if the hoarseness returns.