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Vocal Cord Dysfunction

In 1983, physicians at National Jewish reported a new condition that may mimic asthma. This condition is called Vocal Cord Dysfunction, or VCD. VCD causes asthma-like symptoms because of an abnormal closing of the vocal cords. VCD can cause difficulty breathing and even wheezing. Based on these symptoms, many people with VCD may be diagnosed with asthma and treated with asthma medications, including oral steroids. Since VCD is not asthma, the symptoms do not improve with this treatment. When VCD is not treated properly, it may lead to frequent emergency room visits and hospitalizations. To complicate the situation, some people have a combination of asthma and Vocal Cord Dysfunction.

What Happens with VCD?

To understand VCD, it is helpful to know how the vocal cords function normally. When you breathe in, or inhale, the vocal cords open, allowing air to flow into your windpipe (trachea) and reach your lungs. However, with Vocal Cord Dysfunction, the vocal cords close together, or constrict, when you inhale. This leaves only a small opening for air to flow into your windpipe.

How is VCD Diagnosed?

Making a diagnosis of VCD can be very difficult. If your physician or health care provider suspects VCD you will be asked many questions about your symptoms. Common symptoms include a chronic cough, shortness of breath, difficulty breathing, chest tightness, throat tightness, “difficulty getting air in”, hoarseness and wheezing. Breathing tests may be normal and not show signs of asthma. A specific breathing test called a flow volume loop can be helpful in showing VCD, especially on the “breathing in” or inspiratory part of the loop. This is only helpful if it is done while you are having symptoms. A procedure called a laryngoscopy is the most important test in making the diagnosis of VCD. This procedure is performed by a specialized physician. Using a flexible tube, the physician can see how your vocal cords open and close. A laryngoscopy should be done when you are having symptoms because abnormal vocal cord movements do not occur all the time. Other tests may be done to trigger symptoms so that your physician can observe your vocal cords when you are having symptoms. It is important to know that people with Vocal Cord Dysfunction cannot produce symptoms voluntarily.

What Can Trigger VCD Symptoms?

Possible triggers of VCD are often similar to asthma triggers. Triggers may include upper respiratory infections, fumes, odors, cigarette smoke, singing, emotional upset, post-nasal drip and exercise. Sometimes the trigger is not known.

How is VCD Treated?

Once you are diagnosed with VCD, you can begin a specific treatment program. If VCD is your only condition, your asthma medications may be stopped. If you have a combination of asthma and VCD, asthma medications may be continued, but may often be decreased. Speech therapy is a very important part of the treatment for VCD. Special exercises increase your awareness of abdominal breathing and relax your throat muscles. This enables you to have more control over your throat. You will learn to practice these exercises while you are symptom-free in order to effectively use the exercises during VCD episodes. These exercises help overcome the abnormal vocal cord movements and improve airflow into your lungs. Another important part of treatment is supportive counseling. Counseling can help you adjust to a new diagnosis and a new treatment program. Counseling can also help you identify and deal positively with stress, which may be an underlying factor in VCD. Most people with VCD find counseling to be very beneficial.