

# Hoarse Sense

During the cold and flu season, we hear it everywhere—that strained rasp and croak, that cracked whisper—the hoarse voice. For most of us, this is a short-term inconvenience. For some, it's even an exotic change from our characteristic vocalizations. And usually, it fades within a week or two, along with the rest of the cold and flu symptoms, having caused no permanent damage. But when it comes to a hoarse throat, remember to use your horse sense. Any sudden, unexplained change in your voice, persistent hoarseness, throat pain, or trouble swallowing could indicate something more serious than a simple sore throat.

Generally, hoarseness is caused by a strain to the vocal cords or an inflammation of the vocal folds. The most common causes for this acute laryngitis are common upper respiratory infections, such as a cold or flu, or the overexertion of vocals cords, usually a result of speaking or singing too loudly for an extended time. With time and rest, these symptoms normally abate, but they may become aggravated by activities such as smoking, drinking alcohol or other agents that may cause dehydration, and just plain yelling. If proper care is not taken, more permanent damage may occur and lead to chronic hoarseness and the development of vocal nodules and polyps, which result from the scarring of vocal cords and vocal folds.

If any voice- or throat-related condition continues for more than two weeks, or if it has not been associated with a cold or flu, and especially if you smoke, it is best to seek a consult with a medical professional and perhaps even an otolaryngologist—a specialist in the larynx. An otolaryngologist can examine the damaged area and determine the cause, which could be simple laryngitis, but which could also be a sign of something more serious, like gastroesophageal reflux—the flow of stomach acid up into the esophagus—or some kind of growth on the larynx, including cancer.

Remember, when it comes to a hoarse throat, don't horse around.

