

VOCAL CORD DYSFUNCTION

Vocal cord dysfunction (VCD), also known as paradoxical vocal fold motion, is a condition in which the vocal cords function incorrectly.

The vocal cords are located at the top of the trachea, or windpipe. Typically, the vocal cords open as we breathe air into the lungs. With VCD, the vocal cords sometimes come together as we attempt to breathe in. This can lead to a narrow airway, with only a small opening for air to pass through. As a result, one may experience symptoms such as:

- Sudden difficulty breathing
- Tightness in the throat
- Choking sensation
- Cough
- Stridor (noisy, strained breathing)
- Difficulty getting air IN (versus OUT)
- Hoarseness

VCD is sometimes seen in athletes, and it is often mistaken as asthma. It can also coexist with asthma. Triggers for VCD and asthma are exercise, psychosocial stress, anxiety, reflux, exposure to irritants (smoke, pollutants, strong fragrances and odors), changes in temperature and others.

While the symptoms and triggers of VCD and asthma are often similar, the treatment is very different. This makes an accurate diagnosis essential.

Unlike asthma, medications are not a long-term solution to managing VCD. While medications may help treat underlying causes of VCD (such as reflux), speech therapy is the standard treatment approach to gaining more control of vocal cord movements. With appropriate training and breathing exercises through the guidance of a speech therapist, VCD often resolves without consequences.

Symptom Differences Between PVFM/VCD and Asthma

Symptom	PVFM/VCD	Asthma
Breathing difficulty occurs during	Inhalation (stridor)	Exhalation (wheeze)
Sound originates in	Neck	Chest
Area of constriction is	Throat tightness	Chest tightness
Symptoms peak	Shortly after starting exercise and resolve within several minutes of exercise cessation	Between 5 and 20 minutes after exercise stops
Responds to rescue inhalers	No	Yes