

How can I stop myself from clearing my throat all the time?

Sylvain is always clearing his throat. At the beginning, he did it to make his voice clearer before speaking in meetings, but recently it has become almost a habit.

His friends complain about it, his colleagues have told him about it, but he does not know how to stop himself.

What Sylvain has is called constant throat clearing. It can be occasional or chronic (we all do this from time to time to clear our voice or loosen mucous, but it can become invasive). In this case, it can start to happen all by itself, create or encourage inflammation and represent a social embarrassment. Throat clearing is sometimes unconscious in nature. A person does not even realize that they are clearing their throat all of the time. It is only other people's comments that make them aware of this issue.

Why do we clear our throat?

When we feel something in our larynx, inside of our neck, behind the cartilage of the Adam's apple, we want to get rid of it.

This discomfort can have several origins. The most frequent causes are:

- Gastroesophageal reflux (when stomach acid rises and creates inflammation reaching all the way up to the vocal cords, which are situated horizontally in the center of the neck)
- The presence of mucus that descends down from the nose and into the throat. When this mucus builds up regularly, it is called chronic rhinitis
- Allergies
- Stress
- Smoking
- Certain medication
- Hypersensitive tendencies (some people have very sensitive mucus membranes, therefore increasing their reactivity threshold. They can be bothered by changes in temperature, the humidity or dryness of the air, some cleaning products)
- Overuse of one's voice (when a person has to speak loud for a long time or if they have not learned how to use their voice properly, this could create tension in the vocal cords and cause irritation)

What happens when we clear our throat?

When we clear our throat, we tightly constrict our vocal cords together. If this happens from time to time, there is no danger. However, when this becomes chronic (throat clearing that happens several times a day and over a 3-week or more period), there are medium and even long-term consequences. Sometimes, the line between regular throat clearing and a chronic cough is very thin. The two are related to laryngeal irritation. They both activate the vocal cords and may become socially embarrassing. However, chronic coughing usually comes in fits.

What could be the consequences of chronic throat clearing?

If throat clearing is often related to irritation of the larynx, its repetition can cause a vicious cycle: the more my throat itches, the more I clear my throat. The more I clear my throat, the more inflammation that causes, which is going to make me want to clear my throat over and over again.

What to do in case of chronic throat clearing?

First, you can try to stop this habit, by paying attention to several points:

Awareness is essential: how many times an hour do I clear my throat? Is it all day long? Only in certain circumstances?

You can replace this habit with a more useful and effective one, like drinking a sip of water when your throat itches. Hydration is essential so the larynx functions well.

Some vocal techniques can also help: if I am stressed when I speak, I can learn to relax my tension before speaking, use better breathing techniques, pay attention to my posture as well as the volume of my voice: it is not always necessary to speak loudly to be heard.

What can I do if that does not work?

If these autonomous small changes do not work, you should speak to your general physician. They will look for the cause of the throat clearing, treat it and eventually orient you towards a more adapted specialist.

If there is an allergy, an allergy treatment will be necessary. It will be recommended that you go and see an allergist. In case of gastroesophageal reflux, medication may be proposed as well as measures related to your hygiene-diet: eat less food, especially in the evening, avoid certain foods. A consultation with a gastroenterologist is sometimes useful to understand the cause of this reflux.

Smoking and alcohol consumption should be reduced as much as possible.

If you have chronic rhinitis, an ENT's opinion will be requested. The ENT (Ear-Nose-Throat) will examine the inflammation in the nose, throat and ear area and propose the necessary treatment.

In case of chronic throat clearing, speech therapy is often proposed. Why?

When the medical causes are treated, sometimes throat clearing can still persist because it has become anchored in their habits, and they no longer know how to stop it. Speech therapy is then prescribed by a general physician or a specialist.

The first appointment, which is called the evaluation, makes it possible to go over the patient's medical history, conditions and habits. Very detailed questions provide information on what instigates the throat clearing in the first place.

Secondly, physical therapy is proposed. It is usually only for a short period of time. Throat clearing, chronic coughing as well as laryngeal spasms and paradoxical voice fold movements are included under what is called laryngeal dyskinesia. A speech therapist will teach the patient how the larynx functions and will show them how to voluntarily open their vocal cords whenever they feel the need to clear their throat (and therefore tightly constrict them). Learning how to breathe "with the stomach" (costal-diaphragmatic) is often useful. Patients are also proposed role-playing situations, which will make them want to clear their throat and, therefore, teach the patient about warning signs and the hygiene to adopt on a daily basis.

Chronic throat clearing like a chronic cough may have negative repercussions on the person's social interactions, as well as on the larynx itself, which may become hyper-reactive and always irritated. Adapted medication and paramedical treatment is generally sufficient to make this habit go away and provide the person with relief, who will once again discover the comfort that they had forgotten, sometimes after a very long period of time.