

Allergy symptoms that persist may mean a bigger problem

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Itchy nose or throat or nasal congestion can be signs of allergies ... or something bigger if the problems persist.

With allergy season upon us, many people may be suffering from a scratchy or sore throat, hoarseness and loss of voice.

However, during Oral, Head and Neck Cancer Awareness Week, observed April 12-18, experts at the University of Cincinnati (UC) Cancer Institute warn that if the problems persist, something more serious could be occurring.

"It's true that the throat and vocal cords can become inflamed or irritated because of an allergic reaction, including seasonal allergies, which can even lead to a temporary change or loss of voice," says Rebecca Howell, MD, assistant professor in the Department of Otolaryngology–Head and Neck Surgery at the UC College of Medicine, member of the UC Cancer Institute and a physician who specializes in treating voice and swallowing disorders, "but a lingering change in the voice or pain and problems that don't go away over time or with medication could warrant a trip to a trained voice specialist."

Howell says symptoms of head and neck cancers could also include a persistent lump, [sore throat](#) or

difficulty in swallowing.

"These symptoms may also be caused by other, less serious conditions," she adds. "It is important to check with a physician if anything abnormal occurs."

Symptoms that may affect specific areas of the head and neck include:

- Oral (Mouth): A white or red patch on the gums, the tongue or the lining of the mouth; a swelling of the jaw; unusual bleeding or ulcers in the mouth.
- Pharynx: Trouble breathing or speaking; pain when swallowing; pain in the neck or the throat that does not go away; frequent headaches; fullness in the ears or trouble hearing.
- Larynx: Hoarseness; prolonged laryngitis; tenderness over the neck; pain or increased effort of speaking.
- Sinuses and nasal cavity: Chronic sinus infections that do not respond to medical treatment; nosebleeds; frequent headaches; swelling or other trouble with the eyes; pain in the upper teeth or numbness of the cheek; problems with dentures.

"Many head and neck cancers arise after prolonged exposure to specific risk factors, such as use of tobacco and alcohol, which are the common causes of cancers of the mouth, throat, voice box and tongue," Howell says. "However, there is a growing population of younger patients developing [head and neck cancer](#) who do not smoke or drink but occurs as a result of infection with the [human papilloma virus](#) (HPV). Additionally, people with chronic sun exposure are at elevated risk of skin cancers, particularly on the lower lip.

"It's important to know your [risk factors](#) and to seek medical attention as soon as possible if symptoms arise. Many of these cancers can be treated if

found in early stages. So, if the discomfort of what you think is the result of allergies carries on beyond the typical seasons, please seek help to hopefully live a healthier, happier life."

Provided by University of Cincinnati

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