

When that throat itch means more

Chronic throat inflammation may stem from silent acid reflux, air irritants and post-nasal drip, says consultant ENT surgeon Leslie Koh

A throat that feels itchy all day can wear you down. So can the constant need to clear it, or the lingering feeling of something stuck in your throat.

When these symptoms go on for weeks – or keep returning even when you are not down with a cold – it may point to chronic pharyngitis, a condition caused by persistent inflammation of the throat, says Dr Leslie Koh, consultant ear, nose and throat (ENT) surgeon at Mount Alvernia Hospital.

Here, he explains the common triggers and how to prevent flare-ups.

Q What is chronic pharyngitis, and how does it differ from an ordinary sore throat?

Chronic pharyngitis refers to persistent or recurrent inflammation of the throat – the pharynx – that can last for weeks to months due to ongoing irritation. This is unlike an ordinary sore throat, which is usually caused by a viral or bacterial infection and clears within about five to seven days.

Moreover, instead of sharp pain and fever, people with chronic pharyngitis experience nagging throat discomfort, such as dryness or itch. Despite that, they can still eat and drink normally.

Q What causes ongoing throat irritation, and who is more at risk?

The throat can be constantly irritated by silent acid reflux, which occurs when stomach contents rise and aggravate the throat lining without obvious heartburn. The irritation can also be caused by post-nasal drip, when mucus from the nose trickles down the back of the throat. Mouth breathing, especially during sleep, can also dry out the throat and cause inflammation.

Some people are more prone to it. This includes those with acid reflux, smokers and vapers, and people with untreated or poorly controlled allergies.



Food and drinks high in caffeine may cause reflux, which can worsen throat irritation. PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

Those who use their voice heavily – such as teachers and singers – may also be at higher risk.

Environmental factors, such as air conditioning, low humidity, smoke and pollution, can also dry out the throat and irritate the airway lining.

For people prone to reflux, common triggers include caffeine, alcohol, spicy or acidic foods, as well as lying down soon after meals.

Q How is the cause diagnosed, and what treatments help prevent flare-ups?

ENT doctors typically first assess allergy symptoms or reflux triggers, mouth-breathing patterns and voice use.

They may also perform a quick scope of the nose and throat using a thin flexible camera. This helps identify signs of allergies, post-nasal drip or reflux-related irritation. In selected cases, further assessments, such as allergy testing or 24-hour pH monitoring for reflux, may be performed to confirm the cause.

Treatment is targeted at the most likely causes. Allergies are usually managed with antihistamines and nasal steroid sprays, with saline rinses to help clear nasal mucus. Reflux may be treated with acid-reducing medication, alongside lifestyle tweaks – such as avoiding meals for three to four hours before bedtime.

Simple habits can also prevent flare-ups. Drink enough water, keep the air humidified where possible and rest your voice when it feels strained.



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