

Breathing problem sometimes misdiagnosed in athletes

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Study finds vocal cord disorder can be confused with asthma.

(HealthDay)—A vocal cord problem that restricts athletes' breathing is often misdiagnosed as exercise-induced asthma, a small new study suggests.

Researchers looked at 46 [college athletes](#) who were newly diagnosed with paradoxical vocal fold motion disorder (PVFMD), a condition that can be brought on by stress, anxiety or increased exertion. It causes the vocal cords to constrict and obstruct breathing.

An estimated 5 percent of athletes have the [vocal cord](#) disorder, which can severely affect their performance, according to the researchers at the Ohio State University Medical Center.

"There isn't a lot in the literature about PVFMD in [elite athletes](#), and our study shows that because of their high level of conditioning they may be more difficult to diagnose and treat than non-athletes," lead investigator Dr. Brad deSilva, residency program director for the department of otolaryngology—[head and neck surgery](#), said in a medical center news release.

For example, only 30 percent of the athletes in the study consistently experienced PVFMD symptoms, such as coughing during exercise.

"PVFMD symptoms can often mimic asthma, and as many as 40 percent of people with asthma also have PVFMD—so it's typical for an athlete to get the asthma diagnosed correctly, but not the vocal cord dysfunction," study co-author Dr. Anna Marcinow, a senior resident in the otolaryngology program in the College of Medicine, said in the news release.

The researchers also assessed a number of treatments for the vocal cord disorder, ranging from biofeedback to [Botox injections](#). Biofeedback is a technique that teaches people how to control their body's responses.

The investigators found that vocal cord retraining therapy helped reduce or eliminate breathing problems and allowed many athletes to stop using [asthma inhalers](#).

"Because PVFMD can have both physical and emotional impacts, using tactics that help athletes gain a sense of control over their breathing can be really effective," Marcinow said. "Athletes may also need additional alternative forms of therapy such as [biofeedback](#) or intervention from a sports psychologist."

While the disorder often occurs in athletes who have recently intensified their activity and training, it can also occur in non-athletes who are starting a more demanding exercise program, the researchers noted.

The study was scheduled for presentation Friday at the annual meeting of the Triological Society, in Orlando, Fla. The data and conclusions should be viewed as preliminary until published in a peer-reviewed journal.

More information: The American Speech-Language-Hearing Association has more about [paradoxical vocal fold motion disorder](#).

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