Leukoplakia of the Vocal Cords

Leukoplakia is a “white patch” on the vocal cords. The area may look like a swollen white, gray, or lacy spot. The white patch cannot be wiped off the vocal cords.

Leukoplakia can be caused by a yeast (fungal) infection, or could be a pre-cancerous or cancerous condition. When you have leukoplakia, you may have voice changes because your vocal cords do not vibrate the right way.

Leukoplakia of the vocal cords is diagnosed by having an indirect mirror exam or a laryngoscopy. An indirect mirror exam is when the doctor puts a small mirror that is attached to a long handle in your mouth. This lets the doctor look at your vocal cords. A laryngoscopy is when a small flexible tube is placed up your nose and down the back of your throat, to look directly at your vocal cords.

Risk factors for leukoplakia of the vocal cords include:

- Tobacco use
- Alcohol use
- Laryngopharyngeal reflux (LPR)
- Diabetes
- Use of inhaled steroids
- Use of corticosteroids
- Use of immunosuppressive drugs including chemotherapy and anti-rejection medicines
- Radiation therapy
- Use of antibiotics
- Dry throat

This handout is for informational purposes only. Talk with your doctor or health care team if you have any questions about your care.

Treatment for leukoplakia of the vocal cords includes:

- Antifungal treatment for the mouth
- Drinking more water
- Quit smoking
- Do not drink alcoholic beverages
- Limiting activities that can cause reflux - ask for a copy of the patient education handout on Laryngopharyngeal Reflux (LPR)

If the leukoplakia does not go away with treatment, your doctor may do a biopsy to remove a small piece of the white patch so it can be examined under a microscope. This is done to see if the area has any pre-cancerous or cancerous cells. You may need to have all of the leukoplakia removed. These procedures may be done in the doctor’s office or in the hospital operating room. Your doctor will talk with you about the best option for your situation.

It is important to keep your follow-up appointments because of the risk of cancer with leukoplakia.