

Functional Voice Problems Are More Common in Several Chronic Pain Syndromes

In a retrospective study, researchers examined associations between laryngeal disorders and fibromyalgia, irritable bowel, and chronic fatigue.

Fibromyalgia, irritable bowel, and chronic fatigue are syndromes that share chronic pain and other unexplained symptoms among their clinical manifestations. Otolaryngologists from a voice disorders clinic at a U.S. academic medical center anecdotally observed a high prevalence of these syndromes in patients with voice and airway symptoms; they conducted this retrospective study to examine the prevalence of functional voice disorders in patients with these syndromes. Of more than 4000 patients treated in their clinic, 215 patients had fibromyalgia, irritable bowel, or chronic fatigue. Forty-five common otolaryngologic diagnoses were organized in five categories (laryngeal pathology, functional voice disorders, airway problems, swallowing disorders, and other).

Patients with any of the three chronic pain syndromes were more likely to have functional voice disorders (24% vs. 15%) and less likely to have airway problems (5% vs. 10%) or laryngeal pathology (31% vs. 37%) than were other patients. These differences were significant after adjusting for age and sex.

COMMENT

Primary care clinicians can have difficulty distinguishing between functional voice disorders and serious laryngeal pathology. Because patients with underlying chronic pain disorders and laryngeal symptoms might be particularly likely to have functional dysphonia, immediate referral to an otolaryngologist sometimes can be avoided in such patients. However, any red flag — including a smoking history — is grounds for referral to exclude more serious pathology. — **Thomas L. Schwenk, MD**

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Piersiala K et al. Chronic pain syndromes and their laryngeal manifestations. *JAMA Otolaryngol Head Neck Surg* 2020 Apr 30; [e-pub]. (<https://doi.org/10.1001/jamaoto.2020.0530>)