

TONSILS AND THE PERFORMER

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I was recently training a group of young actors at the Academy of Theater Arts at the University of Mumbai. A question that came up was 'I frequently suffer from throat pain. I think it is because of infection of the tonsils. Do I need to get them operated? Will a tonsillar surgery make my voice worse?'. Vocal performers especially singers are often concerned about the effects of tonsillitis and tonsillar surgery on the voice

Is pain in the throat always a manifestation of tonsillitis?

Pain in the throat or a sore throat may not necessarily mean you are suffering from tonsillitis. Recurring sore throat, pain or a raw scratchy feeling in the throat especially after a performance/ rehearsals in actors, singers and other vocal performers is often related to overuse or misuse of the voice. Inadequate vocal training, incorrect breathing and vocal habits, stress, failure to warm up the voice before strenuous or prolonged voice use are some of the culprits. The novice performer may end up squeezing the muscles of the throat and neck [hyperfunctional voice use] to get the best out of his voice in a performance situation. Acid reflux may further contribute to a sore feeling and irritation in the throat. Viral infections and allergies can also manifest as throat pain/sore throats.

Indications for tonsillectomy in a performer

The indications for tonsillectomy in a performer are the same as for any individual. If a singer or a performer suffers recurrent attacks [about 5 to 6 attacks in a year] of bacterial tonsillitis manifesting as significant pain in the throat, fever, malaise and diagnosed on clinical examination; recurrent tonsillitis leading to laryngitis; if attacks of tonsillitis are frequent and severe, leading to cancellation of performances, thus affecting the performer's career – these are situations where a tonsillectomy may be considered.

Effects of tonsillectomy on the voice

Tonsillectomy will alter the voice as it changes the configuration of the throat [oropharynx i.e the part of the throat behind the mouth], thereby changing the resonance of the voice. However, change in the voice can be minimized by taking care during the surgery to conserve the tonsillar pillars and dissecting in the right plane to minimize post surgical scarring. Intubation [for administering anesthesia] needs to be done with care. Post intubation ulcers/ granulomas can be lethal for a singer. A smooth extubation is also necessary to avoid trauma to the vocal folds. The anesthesiologist must be made aware that the patient is a performer. The singer may have to reorient her/himself to the kinesthetic feedback s/he receives from a changed configuration of the throat after a tonsillectomy. It might take a few months for the voice to return to normal after surgery. If the tonsils have been large [chronic hypertrophic tonsillitis], the resonance might actually improve a few months after surgery.

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