



Globus: “It Brings a Lump to Your Throat” 508

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Who has not experienced a lump or ball in the throat with an intense emotional experience? For some this may be a response to the national anthem, or an impending reunion with an old friend. For others it may be a romantic novel, a sad movie, or even the aftermath of a hard-fought sporting event. Whatever the emotion, the globus response is a common human experience. Globus is Latin for ball or globe. Typically, the sensation of globus is felt in the throat at the level of the Adam’s apple.

In response to questionnaires, 15 to 45% of individuals admit to experiencing globus in the previous year. It seems likely that most of us experience it at sometime in our lives. However, no cause has been demonstrated and no serious consequences can be expected. There appears to be no association with other gastrointestinal disorders such as heartburn or the irritable bowel syndrome. Reported associations with headache or other conditions likely result from referral bias – that is observations of patients sent to specialists. Since globus, like tears, may express an emotion, its presence in people with psychological disorders seems inevitable. It does not follow that all, or even most of those who experience globus have a psychological problem.

Up to a generation ago, globus was considered to be a disorder of hysterical young women, hence the somewhat pejorative term globus hystericus. Even the ancients attributed globus to the uterus – an anatomical stretch to be sure! However, despite these observations, globus is neither confined to women, nor associated with hysteria. Thus, there is absolutely no justification for such a term, unless we conclude that most of us are hysterical at some time in our lives. Moreover, it seems equally prevalent in men and women. It may simply be part of the human condition. Nevertheless, its apparent relationship to emotion means some people will be unnecessarily troubled by the symptom. As a result it is a common complaint to ear, nose and throat surgeons, and sometimes to gastroenterologists.

As with all the functional gastrointestinal disorders, the cause of the globus sensation is unknown. Hypersensitivity of the upper esophagus is suspected by many. One observer suggested that nervousness leads to a dry mouth, repeated

swallowing, and enhanced awareness of the throat. Several attempts to demonstrate alteration in the contraction of the muscles of the upper esophageal sphincter have garnered inconsistent results, and no related anatomical abnormalities have been observed in the throat and larynx. Nevertheless, a troubled patient may be greatly reassured by an otolaryngologist’s [ear, nose, and throat specialist] examination.

From a medical point of view, it is important to distinguish the globus sensation from dysphagia, or difficulty swallowing. Unlike globus, dysphagia usually indicates a demonstrable cause, and mandates investigation of the esophagus. Heartburn commonly occurs with globus, as it does in people generally. However, the two conditions do not appear to be causally related, and treatment of heartburn does not benefit the globus. By itself, globus seldom indicates a structural disease, that is a disease where damage to the body can be demonstrated. Nevertheless, any accompanying symptom must be investigated as indicated.

Globus uniquely occurs between meals, and is somewhat relieved by swallowing something, often a glass of water. Many feel better after a good cry. On the other hand, dysphagia occurs during the swallowing of food or sometimes liquids. It gives the sensation that something is stuck in the gullet – often below the throat. An attempt to swallow in this situation seems to make things worse.

There is no specific treatment for globus beyond the assurance that no serious disease is implicated. Repeated attacks may indicate an emotional disorder, and this, not the globus itself, is worthy of medical attention. Those with anxiety, depression, panic or other emotional trouble may require treatment or advice. For most of us, globus is part of our emotional response to the vicissitudes of life. Meanwhile, prevention may include avoidance of late night movies such as *Gone with the Wind*.

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