

Speech and Language Therapy

Your voice and how to look after it

This leaflet describes how your voice works. It also suggests some of the things you can do to help keep your voice healthy and avoid hoarseness (a change in voice quality) and discomfort. If you have any further questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to speak to your speech and language therapist (SLT).

What is causing the problems with my voice?

There are many different things that can cause hoarseness and discomfort. An ear, nose and throat (ENT) specialist or a member of staff in the voice clinic has examined your vocal cords for any signs of abnormality such as growths, swellings or bleeds. The examination will also highlight any signs of irritation of the delicate structures that make up your voice mechanism or larynx (voice box). The main symptom of this irritation is hoarseness.

Your hoarseness may have been longstanding, or may come and go, often in connection with a lot of talking, especially loudly, and/or when you have a cold. People who use their voice professionally, for example teachers, call centre staff, ministers, actors and singers, are more prone to hoarseness as they use their voices more than the average person.

Some people feel discomfort in the throat such as dryness, tickling, burning or aching without there being any hoarseness or physical sign of abnormality.

How can it be treated?

The ENT specialist will decide whether there is a need for surgery, medication or voice therapy, or a combination of these, to treat your problem. If they recommend surgery or medication, you will be given more information about this.

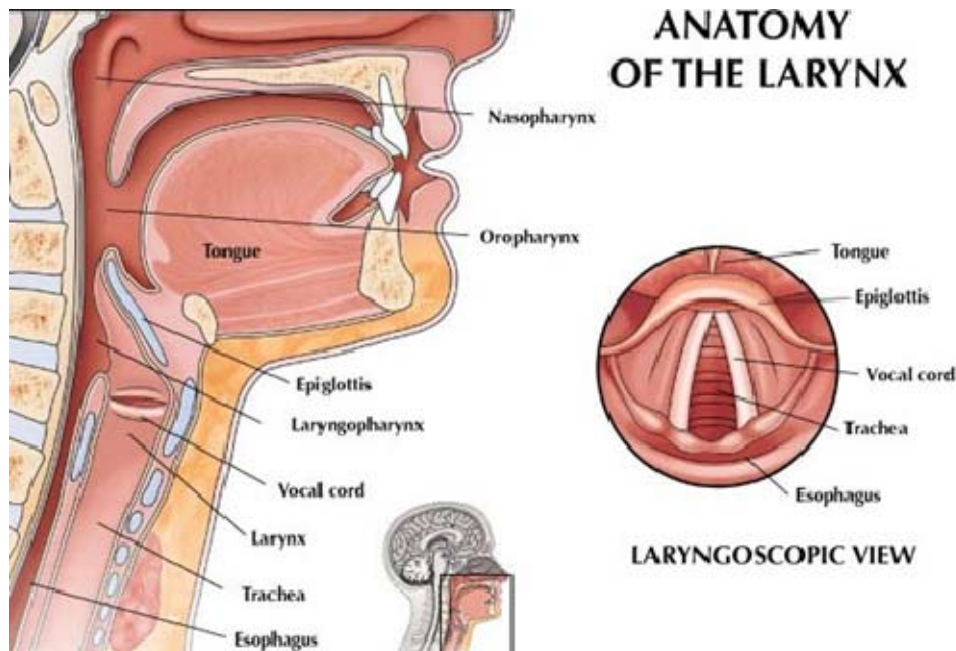
The vast majority of patients seen by the ENT specialist have no serious cause for their hoarseness, but may have major problems with a hoarse voice and/or laryngeal discomfort.

There are many things you can do to help, which are outlined in this leaflet.

What is the purpose of the larynx/voice box?

The larynx (voice box) is a highly specialised organ which is perched on top of the trachea (windpipe). Its primary purpose is to act as a valve which closes when we swallow. This stops food and drink from entering the lungs. We also use the larynx to produce voice when we speak, laugh, sing and cough.





Picture courtesy of Trial Sight Medical Media

What is voice?

Inside the larynx are two muscles covered with a delicate membrane. These are called the vocal cords. When the vocal cords are healthy, they appear as a pearly white 'V' shape. The edges are smooth and flexible, allowing the voice to vary in pitch, volume and quality.

When we breathe the vocal cords are open and this allows air to flow in and out of the lungs. When we speak the vocal cords move towards each other. The air coming from our lungs acts as the power source for the voice. The moving air causes vibrations over the edges of the vocal cords and this rapid vibration makes a sound.

This is similar to what happens when you let the air out of the neck of a balloon or when you blow on a blade of grass. We need a steady stream of air to keep the vibration going, so breathing is an essential part of producing voice. As the vibrations move up through the throat and into the mouth, we use our cheeks, lips and tongue to shape the noise into the sounds we want for speech.

How to look after your voice

Do...

- Aim to drink two litres of non-caffeinated, non-alcoholic fluid a day (avoid cola). Slightly acidic drinks such as diluted lime or orange juice may help produce more saliva.
- Suck a sugar free sweet or chew gum if your mouth/throat feels dry and you cannot get a drink.
- Rest your voice if it feels 'tired' or sounds husky for whatever reason, including a cold. 'Rest' means not speaking unless it is necessary, and when you do speak, use a soft volume, low pitched voice in quiet surroundings.
- Take another breath if you feel you are running out of breath while speaking – if you run out of breath you run out of voice!

- Try to relax when speaking especially your shoulders and head/neck region, so you can feel the breath support coming from your stomach muscles.
- Think about your posture, drop your shoulders, open up your chest, 'unfurl' your neck – grow tall!
- Turn off background noise such as TVs and radios when you are speaking.
- Pace your voice use, so if you anticipate heavy speaking demands, do not go out 'clubbing' or socialising the evening before.

Avoid...

- Smoking tobacco, as this involves inhaling smoke past the vocal cords. This dries them out and may cause irritation and inflammation. Smoking also greatly increases your risk of developing laryngeal, mouth and lung cancer.
- Screaming, shouting, yelling or doing anything with your voice that makes it go husky or feel 'sore'.
- Clearing your throat – try swallowing, drinking or sucking a sugar free sweet to increase saliva production instead.
- Speaking over background noise, particularly loud, amplified music.
- Shouting to make yourself heard by people who are deaf or hard of hearing. There are amplifiers, hearing aids and paper and pens to help communication. Facing someone who has hearing problems and using slow, clear speech at normal conversational volume is likely to be more effective than shouting.
- Singing at a pitch or volume that makes your throat hurt or your voice husky.

Some of things listed above may have contributed to your voice problem, if you did them regularly. Only you can do something to change it. If you do not follow the advice above, your voice problem is likely to persist or may even get worse.

What else can I do to keep my voice healthy?

Eat regular meals and avoid eating big meals late at night. Leave at least two to three hours between your last meal and going to bed. This reduces the risk of acid regurgitation (reflux) when you lie down at night. This is when stomach acid travels back up your food pipe (gullet). When you are lying flat, it may spill over into your windpipe and cause irritation and swelling of your vocal cords. If you are aware that you suffer from reflux, see your doctor and ask for a prescription for antacid medication.

If you are overweight, try to lose some weight as this will help to reduce your reflux. Speak to your doctor if you need advice or help.

Use steam inhalations (breathing in the steam from a bowl of hot water with a towel over your head) if you get a cold and lose your voice (laryngitis). Breathing in steam helps to moisten your larynx and the vocal cords as the moist air flows into your lungs via the vocal cords. Do not force yourself to speak if you have laryngitis. Making voice should always feel easy!

Avoid stress. Stress causes muscle tension which interferes with breathing. As breathing and breath support is vital for voice



Relax. Use any form of relaxation that feels appropriate in your case. Go to relaxation classes and/or take regular physical exercise, for example yoga or swimming.

Should you have any concerns or further questions, please do not hesitate to contact us:

Tel: 01342 414526

Please ask if you would like this leaflet in larger print or an alternative format

Issue 1 – Ref: no.0534

Approved by the Patient Information Group

NOTES:

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal blue or grey ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page, leaving small margins at the top and bottom. There are no vertical margin lines, and the paper is otherwise completely blank.