

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).

How does your voice work?

The vocal folds or 'cords', in your voice box ('larynx'), are two folds of tissue that contain a ligament and muscle and are covered with a mucous membrane. Joined at the front, the vocal folds open during breathing, leaving a "V" shaped opening to the airway. When you swallow they come together and close the airway completely.

To create sound, the vocal folds are brought together and then made to vibrate by air coming up from the lungs. On average, men's larger vocal folds vibrate about 100 times per second and women's at about 200 times a second. The sound waves produced are shaped by our teeth, tongue and jaw to make speech sounds.

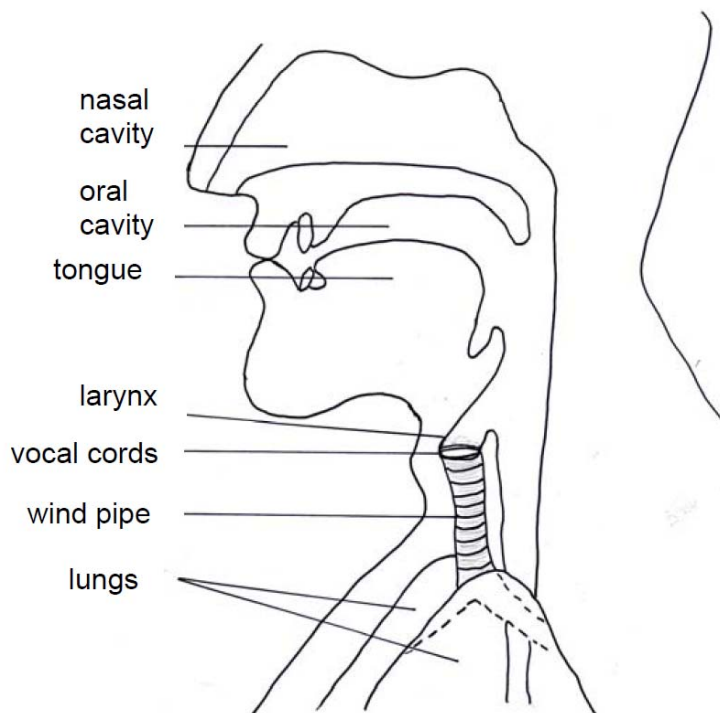


Image drawn by hospital staff

What is causing the problems with my voice?

There are many different things that can cause discomfort or changes in your voice quality. For example:

- a recent cold or infection
- damage to the voice box from external injury
- the way in which the voice is used, e.g. shouting, screaming
- lung conditions, such as asthma, can reduce the airflow needed for voice
- imbalance in the voice box's muscle tone can affect your voice
- stress and worry can also affect your voice.

An ear, nose and throat (ENT) specialist has examined your vocal folds for any problems such as swelling, growths or minor bleeding. The examination will have also looked for signs of irritation in your voice mechanism or voice box. These could be from acid reflux, allergies or smoking. Acid reflux is when acids from your stomach cause irritation by leaking into the tube that connects your throat and stomach.

How can my voice problems 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 have recommended 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 symptoms but may experience significant problems with hoarseness and/or discomfort.

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

How to look after your voice

In order for your voice to improve, you will need to follow this advice.

Do...

- Aim to drink two litres of non-caffeinated, non-alcoholic fluid a day (avoid fizzy drinks and citrus fruit juices). It is best to take sips throughout the day to help lubricate your vocal folds. Steam inhalations are another good way of introducing moisture into your larynx.
- Suck a sugar-free sweet or chew gum if your mouth or throat feels dry and you cannot get a drink.
- Rest your voice if it feels 'tired' or sounds husky for whatever reason, including when you have a cold. 'Rest' means not speaking unless it is absolutely necessary, and when you do speak, use a quiet 'confidential voice' rather than a whisper.
- 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. If you will need to speak a lot, try to avoid going out to a noisy event the evening before and try to use emails and texts rather than a phone call or meeting.

Avoid...

- Smoking, as this involves inhaling smoke past the vocal folds. This dries them out and may cause irritation and inflammation. Smoking also greatly increases your risk of developing cancer of the mouth, lung or larynx.
- Screaming, shouting, yelling or doing anything with your voice that makes it go husky or feel 'sore'.
- Clearing your throat – use alternatives such as doing a strong swallow followed by taking a sip of water or doing a quick, strong sniff followed by a swallow.
- Speaking over background noise, particularly loud, amplified music.
- Shouting to make yourself heard by people who are deaf or hard of hearing. 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.

What else can I do to keep my voice healthy?

- Eat regular meals and avoid eating late at night. Leave at least two to three hours between your last meal and going to bed. This reduces the risk of acid reflux when you lie down at night. This is when stomach acid travels back up your food pipe (oesophagus/gullet). When you are lying flat, it may spill over into your windpipe and cause irritation and swelling of your vocal folds.
- If you are aware that you suffer from reflux, see your doctor and ask for a prescription for antacid medication. For more information, see our **Acid reflux** leaflet.
- 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.
- Do not force yourself to speak if you have laryngitis (you have lost your voice or it is very hoarse). 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 production, stress may be a major cause of voice problems.
- 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.

Contact us

If you have any questions or concerns, please contact the Speech and Language Therapy Department at **Guy's Hospital** on **020 7188 6233** or **St Thomas' Hospital** on **020 7188 6240, Monday–Friday, 9.30am – 5pm.**

For more information leaflets on conditions, procedures, treatments and services offered at our hospitals, please visit www.guysandstthomas.nhs.uk/leaflets

Useful sources of information

Pharmacy Medicines Helpline

If you have any questions or concerns about your medicines, please speak to the staff caring for you or call our helpline.

t: 020 7188 8748 9am to 5pm, Monday to Friday

Your comments and concerns

For advice, support or to raise a concern, contact our Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS). To make a complaint, contact the complaints department.

t: 020 7188 8801 (PALS) **e:** pals@gstt.nhs.uk

t: 020 7188 3514 (complaints) **e:** complaints2@gstt.nhs.uk

Language Support Services

If you need an interpreter or information about your care in a different language or format, please get in touch:

t: 020 7188 8815 **e:** languagesupport@gstt.nhs.uk

NHS 111

Offers medical help and advice from fully trained advisers supported by experienced nurses and paramedics. Available over the phone 24 hours a day.

t: 111

NHS Choices

Provides online information and guidance on all aspects of health and healthcare, to help you make choices about your health.

w: www.nhs.uk

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