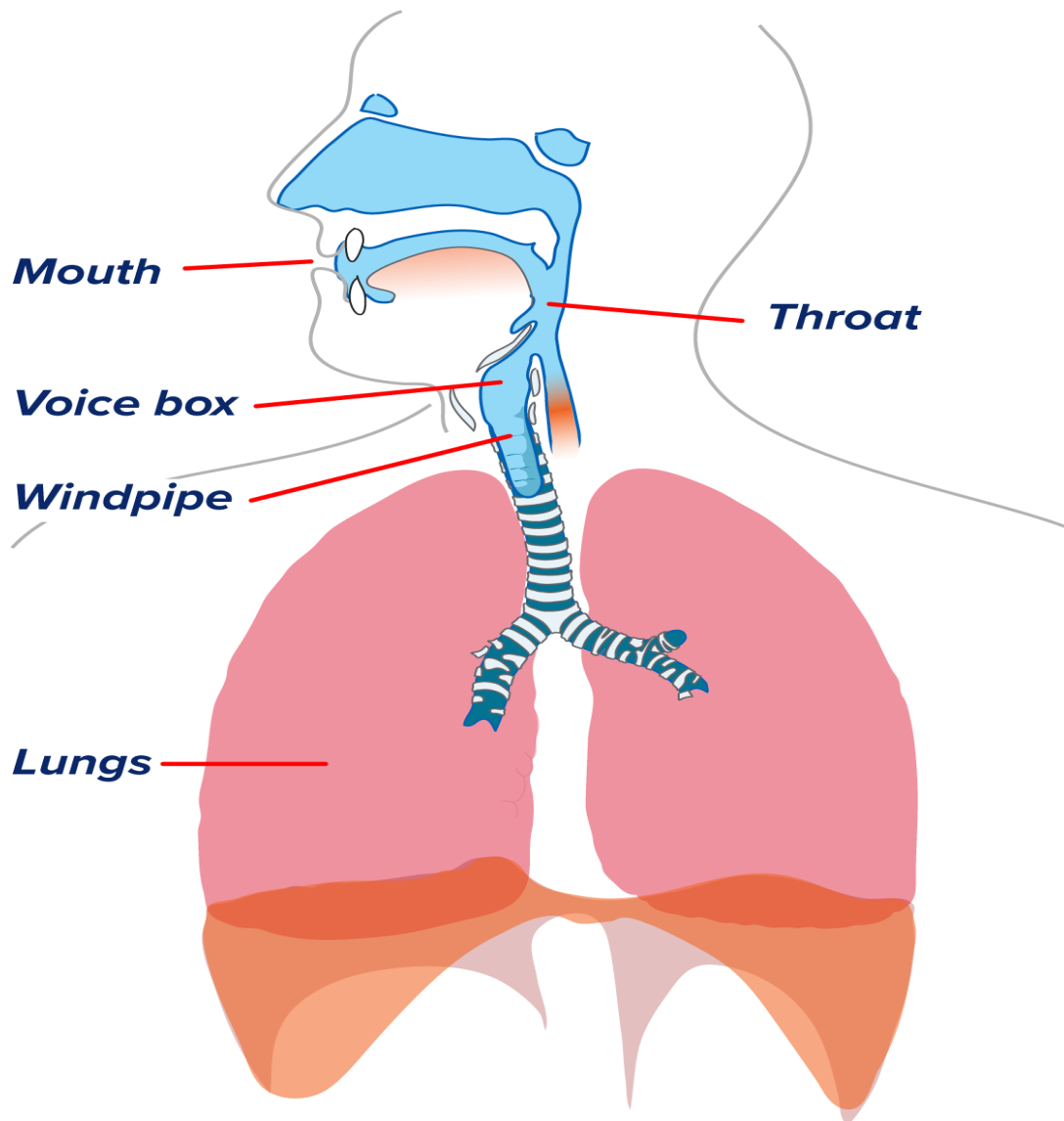


Voice Care Information

This leaflet will help you understand how your voice works and how you can care for your voice.

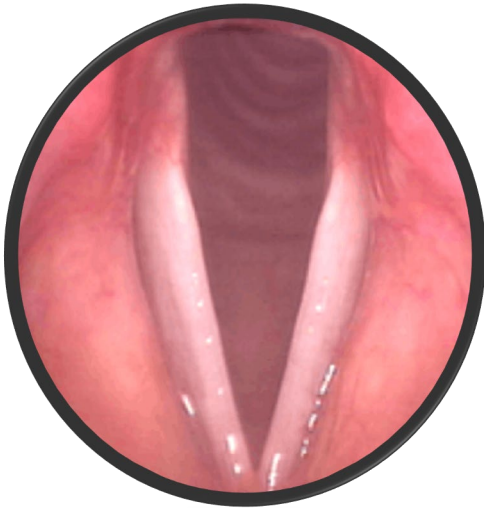


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How the voice works

Your voice is produced in your voice box (also known as the larynx) which sits at the top of the windpipe (trachea). Inside your voice box are your vocal cords. Air from your lungs travels up the windpipe and vibrates your vocal cords to produce your voice.

The vocal cords are two muscles covered with a delicate membrane.



When the vocal cords are healthy, they appear as a pearly white “v” shape (see photo). The edges are smooth and flexible, allowing the voice to vary 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 to 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.

Vocal cord vibration is rapid. When we speak, vocal cords come together and move apart at a rate of around 100-220 times each second! 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.

Why voice problems develop

Many different things cause changes in the voice. You might notice changes in how your voice sounds (it can become hoarse, weak, strained or breathy). It can also affect how your throat feels e.g. dry, scratchy, sore, tight, achey. Some people also feel a sensation of a lump in the throat. The most common causes of these changes are:

- Colds or infections in the upper respiratory tract
- Excessive voice use, such as shouting/screaming or generally overusing our speaking or singing voice
- Respiratory conditions which can make us shorter of breath e.g. asthma or COPD
- Stress or struggling with difficult emotions
- Acid reflux
- Smoking



When the voice box becomes damaged, physical changes take place such as those seen in the photo opposite. These changes can alter the sound of the voice and make it painful and tiring to speak or sing.

Following the advice in this leaflet can help the voice box repair itself over time allowing voice production to become more comfortable.

Images (**Page 2/3**) courtesy of the British Voice Association

How you can look after your voice box

Using your voice

- Think about how often you use your voice. If you are constantly talking or singing your vocal cords are constantly vibrating together. Your voice needs regular rest periods so try to build this into your day.

- Don't avoid speaking altogether. Just like any muscles, our vocal cords need regular, gentle use. Rest is important but so is gentle use at regular intervals. If you are on your own, try gentle humming or counting/reading aloud.
- Avoid straining your voice by shouting or talking over background noise.
- Singing can also be a strain on your voice, particularly if you have not been professionally trained.
- Consider your volume and how fast you speak. Try to slow down and speak gently.
- Do you feel you are out of breath when talking? Try to pause more often for a deeper breath.

Silent Reflux

When acid from your stomach travels up to the voice box it can affect your voice.

- If you have been diagnosed with silent reflux it is essential that you take your medication exactly as prescribed without missing any days. Order a new prescription from your GP before you run out of tablets and medicine so that no days are missed.
- You should also follow (as closely as possible) the life style recommendations on the reflux advice sheet which is available on our webpage.

Caffeine and alcohol

These may be drying agents.

- Reduce excessive intake of coffee, tea, caffeinated fizzy drinks; replace with water (hot or cold), juice or decaffeinated versions.
- Avoid drinking alcohol to excess before speaking for long periods or singing.
- Bear in mind that alcohol alters your awareness of how you are using your voice.

Dehydration

A dry throat sounds strained and your voice will not carry as well.

- Ensure that you have enough water to drink, particularly when speaking for long periods. Try to keep a water bottle with you at all times.
- Aim to drink a minimum of 3 pints /1.5 litres of fluid which does not contain caffeine or alcohol per day.
- If you have a dry throat or your saliva feels thick, steam inhalation can help. See our leaflet on steam inhalation on our webpage.
- Keep up liquid levels, by taking regular sips throughout the day.

Throat clearing and coughing

These behaviours are hard on the voice. The vocal cords are brought together forcefully, with risk of damage, and mucus production can be worsened. If you regularly throat-clear or cough without producing phlegm, this may be a habit rather than a necessity. Breaking this

habit is very important for your voice. Try to replace a throat-clear/cough with one of the following:

- Take a sip of water
- Suck a sugar free sweet
- Do an effortful swallow
- Do a gentle throat-clear followed by an effortful swallow
- A yawn followed by a swallow
- Bear in mind that regular throat-clearing can be a symptom of reflux – are you managing your reflux well?

Medication

Some drugs affect voice quality, e.g. inhalers for asthma, anti-histamines etc.

- Be mindful that over the counter medicines e.g. medicinal sweets can contain anaesthetics to numb pain. This will reduce your awareness of when your throat hurts and may stop you knowing when you need to rest your voice.
- Consult your doctor if any prescriptions seem to affect your voice.
- Some medications can cause a dry mouth and throat or an irritable cough. Check the side effects listed in your medication packet.
- Take care to sip water after using a steroidal inhaler.

Tobacco and other drugs

These have a profound effect on the vocal tract, drying and irritating the tissues. This may cause redness and generalised irritation to the nose and throat. If smoking continues this can lead to laryngeal cancer and pre cancerous conditions.

- Stop smoking - if you have difficulty ask your GP to refer you to a smoking cessation clinic.
- Avoid smoky atmospheres.

Tiredness, stress, emotions

It is more difficult to breathe and speak adequately when you are tired, afraid or stressed. At these times we often experience:

- Vocal strain and dry throat
- Heightened breathing rate and heart rate
- Tighter vocal cords, leading to tension and higher pitch

The voice reflects emotional states; vocal change can come about due to increased tension which has emotional origins. If you can identify that your voice problem is associated with stress, you should discuss this with your GP.

If stress, tiredness or emotional difficulties are present, it is important to recognise this. Taking time every day to relax will be a priority for you and your voice.

Hormonal changes

Women experience hormonal changes pre-menstrually. When hormone levels change the vocal cords can swell and increase in mass. This may cause lower pitch and a husky-sounding voice. Avoid excessive vocal demands at these times.

Hot, dry atmospheres and central heating

These conditions dry out the tissues in the throat.

- Humidify the environment around you; place bowls of water on or near a radiator, have house plants in water, or hang a damp towel over the radiator.
- Ventilate rooms when possible.
- Sip water regularly.
- Consider steam inhalation

Colds, coughs and infective sore throats

- Save your voice as much as possible if you have a cold or a sore throat. Avoid unnecessary talking, take plenty of cool drinks, suck sugar free sweets or chew gum to keep your mouth moist. Beware of lozenges which may have a drying effect, can be irritants or can numb sensation (stopping you from knowing when you need to rest your voice).
- Gentle steam can reduce soreness. When inhaled, the steam rising from hot water reaches, soothes and moistens your larynx

If your voice starts to be affected when you are beginning to get a cold REST IT and try the following:

- Use the phone less; use text or e-mail instead.
- Avoid whispering. It does not save the voice but actually strains the voice box and can be damaging.
- Avoid singing.
- Avoid excessive or heavy voice use e.g. talking for long periods, especially at raised volumes. If you push your voice in this way when you have a cold this can cause further problems.
- Drink plenty of fluids - especially water.

Background noise

Raising the pitch of your voice, using a loud voice, yelling and shouting can lead to strain.

- Be aware of the noise level around you; don't try to strain to talk over noise.
- Avoid using a mobile phone in a moving car; engine noise is louder than you think.
- Avoid speaking for long periods in noisy conditions - over classroom activities, in swimming pools, pubs, parties, etc. Remove or reduce unnecessary noise when possible e.g. turn the TV/ radio off before speaking. Use clear, precise delivery; remember that people lip-read when they listen.

Dust, chalk, fumes, felt-tip pen fumes, some solvent-based glues, chlorine etc

These are irritants, which cause the tissues of the vocal tract to become dry or inflamed.

- Avoid dusty environments. If you can't, wear a dust mask.
- Avoid fume-filled atmospheres (e.g. spaces where a lot of aerosols are used).
- Make sure your environment is properly cleaned and well ventilated.
- Drink water.

Being heard

- Always aim to produce normal conversational voice.
- Focus on the listener – adjust the volume of your voice and clarity of speech to match the distance between you and them.
- Look at the person you are speaking to; don't shout to someone in another room Use visual signs (raised hand) or sound signals (clap, bell, whistle, etc) to attract attention.
- Draw the group close to speak to you in big spaces like halls or gyms – don't fight the acoustics.
- For people with hearing impairment, make sure you face them when speaking.
- Use a microphone if you need to deliver any presentations/speeches etc to a large group.

What to do next...

Your ENT consultant has asked you to follow the advice we have given you here. This will help you care better for your voice and many people find that following the advice in this leaflet resolves their voice problem. A minority of people need further support. If you still feel concerned about your voice after following the advice this leaflet for around 6 weeks and would like to speak to a Speech Therapist please contact us on **01592 226784**.

Speech and language therapy starts with an initial telephone consultation where we get to know your concerns. It may involve training in strategies or exercises to enable to you use your voice safely. If we need to see you, this may be by Near Me video appointments or we may ask you to travel to see us face to face. Please note if you are accessing the information here and have concerns about your voice but have not been seen by ENT, please contact your GP.