

Guide to dysphonia and keeping a healthy voice

Other formats

If you need this information in another format such as audio CD, Braille, large print, high contrast, British Sign Language or translated into another language, please telephone the PALS desk on 01271 314090.

Voice problems and throat discomfort

To produce voice we need:

- A power source – air from the lungs
- A vibratory mechanism – the voice box (larynx)
- Resonating cavities – the chest, throat, mouth and nose

Voice is produced in the larynx (voice box) which sits at the top of the trachea (windpipe). When we speak, the two vocal folds come together gently. Air from the lungs travels up the windpipe, causing very fast vibration of the vocal folds – this is the source of the sound of your voice. The sound is then modified and amplified by the spaces in your throat, mouth and nose (the resonating cavities) to produce the voice we hear during speech.

To use our voice effectively we need:

1. Good posture and appropriate muscle tension in the larynx and upper body
2. Enough air coming up from the lungs to support vocal fold vibration
3. Vocal folds coming together to make gentle contact
4. A range of physical and emotional factors can affect how efficiently we use our voice.

Dysphonia

Dysphonia is the name given to a problem with the voice. Your voice may sound hoarse, rough, breathy, weak, strained or limited in pitch. You may also feel tightness, discomfort or pain in the throat when talking or swallowing.

Causes of dysphonia

There are many different causes of dysphonia and it is often a combination of factors that lead to the development of dysphonia. When the voice is not working well, we often unknowingly compensate by pushing the throat muscles a bit harder (straining) to make ourselves heard. This may result in persisting hoarseness and/or throat discomfort.

Strategies to help your voice

Keep well hydrated

- Drink plenty of water, 1.5-2 litres per day. Consider reducing your caffeine/alcohol intake.
- Use steam inhalation of plain hot water (10 minutes, 2-3 times daily)

Conserve your voice/rest your voice as appropriate

- Cut down on the amount you talk
- Put aside time to rest your voice. Avoid whispering, singing or vocal impersonations.
- Speak more slowly with clear pronunciation. Use shorter utterances rather than increasing the volume.
- Use non-vocal communication – email, texting, gesture

Use a gentle voice

- Avoid straining and forcing the voice. Use a 'confidential' voice.

Keep the volume down

- Avoid shouting, screaming, calling out. Avoid talking over noise.

Avoid irritants

- Avoid smoky atmospheres, cigarettes and excessive alcohol/caffeine
- Be aware of irritants that may affect your voice e.g. dust, inhaled chemicals, dry air, menthol

Avoid clearing your throat / unnecessary coughing

- Do a firm swallow instead, or clear your throat/cough as gently as possible. Take some sips of water. Yawn or do a gentle clear "hmmmm" to relax the laryngeal muscles.
- Persistent throat clearing or coughing irritates the larynx and can damage the outer layer of the vocal folds. It can become a habit and it can affect your voice quality and increase throat discomfort.

Keep a check on stress levels

- When we are stressed we can use inappropriate muscle tension to talk
- Take regular exercise, invest time in enjoyable activities
- Avoid bottling up your feelings – talk them through with friends/family
- Talk to your GP regarding counselling/stress management/medication

Reflux laryngitis – do you have any symptoms of throat discomfort?

- Focus on diet, eating schedule, posture and stress levels
- Discuss medication with a doctor. Take medication consistently as prescribed. It may take over three months for your throat discomfort or hoarseness to resolve.
- Consider consulting with your GP about acid-blocking tablets and over-the-counter alginates e.g. Gaviscon Advance (which contains 1000mg sodium alginate)

When you have a throat infection, viral laryngitis or allergies

- Cut down on the amount you talk and use the voice gently.
- Avoid straining the voice. Keep the volume down. Drink plenty of water and use steam inhalation. Cut down on work and social engagements until you are fully recovered. Consult with your GP about treatment for allergies or post nasal drip.

Keep a voice diary

- Make a note of how your voice sounds and how the throat feels on waking, mid-morning, midday, late afternoon, late evening.
- Aim to identify factors that help/hinder your voice. Try to make changes that benefit your voice.

Speech and language therapy and dysphonia

The speech and language therapist will ask you questions about how and when your voice problem first started, your lifestyle and how you use your voice. They will also explain how the voice works and give you general advice on how to look after your voice.

If needed, a course of therapy sessions may be offered. The therapist will support you in setting and meeting goals for the recovery of your voice.

Further information and support

British Voice Association

330 Gray's Inn Road, London, WC1X 8EE

Telephone: 0300 123 2773

www.britishvoiceassociation.org.uk

British Laryngological Association

c/o ENT UK Royal College of Surgeons of England
35-43 Lincoln's Inn Fields, London, WC2A 3PE
www.britishlaryngological.org

Royal College of Speech & Language Therapists

2-3 White Hart Yard, London SE1 1NX
Telephone: 0207 3781200
www.rcslt.org

PALS

The Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) ensures that the NHS listens to patients, relatives, carers and friends, answers questions and resolves concerns as quickly as possible. If you have a query or concern call 01271 314090 or email ndht.pals@nhs.net. You can also visit the PALS and Information Centre in person at North Devon District Hospital, Barnstaple.

Have your say

Northern Devon Healthcare NHS Trust aims to provide high quality services. However, please tell us when something could be improved. If you have a comment or compliment about a service or treatment, please raise your comments with a member of staff or the PALS team in the first instance.

'Care Opinion' comments forms are on all wards or online at www.careopinion.org.uk.

Northern Devon Healthcare NHS Trust
Raleigh Park, Barnstaple
Devon EX31 4JB
Tel. 01271 322577
www.northdevonhealth.nhs.uk

© Northern Devon Healthcare NHS Trust
This leaflet was designed by the Communications Department.
Tel: 01271 313970 / Email: ndht.contactus@nhs.net.