

## 22. Speech problems

People with cancer of the brain or head and neck may experience difficulties with their speech. However, it can occur with some other types of cancer as well. People may feel frustrated and embarrassed by their speech difficulties. It can be socially very isolating as people may not try to talk to them and ask their partners/carers questions instead. They may find that people pretend to understand them, thinking this is helpful. The social aspects of the speech problem and prejudice that people experience can be distressing. For some people, a change in their voice will only be a minor, temporary problem and their speech will return to normal, or near normal, as the tissues heal. For others, it will be more of a problem and will cause permanent changes to the way they speak. People may experience the following difficulties:

- **A change to the way the voicebox works – Dysphonia**  
The voice may lack power, have an altered tone or sound hoarse. This may make it difficult for them to be heard in noisy situations or to use the telephone.
- **People may have had their voicebox removed – Total laryngectomy**  
When the voice box is removed the person has to learn to talk in a completely new way. They may use a machine against their neck (artificial larynx), a speech valve, oesophageal voice, mouthing and/or writing. The breathing mechanism is altered and the person will breathe through a permanent hole in their neck (stoma). They will need to put their thumb over the stoma to produce voice with the speech valve.
- **A change to the way the muscles of the mouth are able to move – Articulation difficulties**  
This causes difficulty with articulation or pronunciation of words. The person's speech may be slow, imprecise or slurred.
- **Difficulty thinking of the words to use – Aphasia**  
The person knows what they want to say but finds it difficult to think of the correct words. They may use the wrong word or stumble over words. The speech may be slow and difficult to make sense of. Sometimes the person may have difficulty understanding other people's speech as well as talking. In this situation reading and writing may be affected as well and so it is not always possible to use writing as an alternative way to communicate.

### How can I manage my speech problems?

- It is important for you to take time to adjust to the changes you are experiencing whether these are temporary or permanent. The reactions of strangers may be harder to get used to, but will get easier. It often helps if you can put your listener at ease by simply explaining that you have had treatment that has made it difficult for you to talk.
- You are not alone in having these difficulties and it can be helpful to talk to others who are experiencing the same problems as yourself through a support group. (See list of support groups in your area.)
- Carrying a notebook and pen can be useful to aid communication.
- Losing the ability to speak normally can be frustrating and distressing.
- A referral to a speech or language therapist can help you learn to communicate in the clearest and most effective way

Living With and Beyond Cancer Information Sheet

# 22. Speech problems - Resources/Information

## Local Resources:

|                               |   |
|-------------------------------|---|
| Speech and Language Therapist | Speech & Language Therapy (SaLT) NDDH—Referral from Cancer Nurse Specialist or Oncologist |
| Other resources:              | CNS, GP, District Nurse and Oncologist  |
|                               |   |

## National Resources:

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| <b>For people with voice problems:</b> Voice Care Network  | <a href="http://www.voicecare.org.uk">www.voicecare.org.uk</a>   |
| <b>For people without a voicebox:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>National Association of Laryngectomy Clubs</li> <li>Cancer Laryngectomy Trust</li> </ul>  | <a href="http://www.laryngectomy.org.uk">www.laryngectomy.org.uk</a><br><a href="http://www.cancerlt.org">www.cancerlt.org</a>   |
| <b>For people with aphasia:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>National aphasia association</li> <li>Speakability</li> <li>Aphasia Information</li> </ul>  | <a href="http://www.aphasia.org">www.aphasia.org</a><br><a href="http://www.speakability.org.uk">www.speakability.org.uk</a><br><a href="http://www.ukconnect.org">www.ukconnect.org</a>   |
| <b>For people with oral cancer:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Mouth Cancer Foundation</li> </ul>  | <a href="http://www.mouthcancerfoundation.org">www.mouthcancerfoundation.org</a>   |
| <b>Royal College of Speech and Language Therapy</b>  | Email: <a href="mailto:info@rcslt.org">info@rcslt.org</a> Tel: <b>020 7378 1200</b>  |
| <b>Macmillan Cancer Support Line</b><br><a href="http://www.macmillan.org.uk">www.macmillan.org.uk</a><br>Call <b>0808 808 00 00</b> — 7 Days a week 8am—8pm   | Calls are free of charge from all consumer landlines and mobile phones plus all mobile networks. Please note that calls to this number are not free when made from outside the UK. If you are calling from outside of the UK call on <b>+44 207 091 2230</b> |
| <a href="#">Macmillan on-line Community</a>  | Online support— to share experiences or vent your emotions find others who understand—join today!  |
| <b>Marie Curie Support Line</b> — Living with a terminal illness and looking for support<br><a href="http://www.mariecurie.org.uk/help/support/marie-curie-support">www.mariecurie.org.uk/help/support/marie-curie-support</a> | Calls are free of charge from all consumer landlines and mobile phones plus all mobile networks. The Support Line is open 8am – 6pm Monday to Friday and 11am – 5pm Saturday   |

## Other Resources :

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| <b>Macmillan Booklets:</b> | Managing the symptoms of cancer— <b>MAC 11671</b> |
|                            | Understanding Chemotherapy — <b>MAC 11619_E15</b> |
|                            | Understanding Radiotherapy — <b>MAC 11640</b>     |