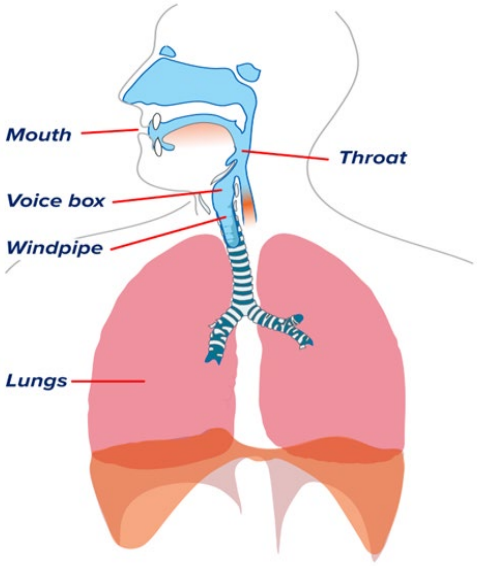
# Looking after your voice

Information for patients

You have been referred to speech and language therapy (SLT) by the Ear Nose and Throat team (ENT) due to issues you are experiencing with your voice. This leaflet will help you understand how your voice works and how you can care for your voice whilst awaiting an appointment.

Many people find that following this advice resolves their voice problem without need for further appointment. You are on the waiting list, and we will contact with you to ask if you still require an appointment following this advice.




## How the voice works

Your voice is produced in your voice box (larynx) which sits at the top of the windpipe (trachea). Inside your voice box are your vocal cords. (see picture below)

Vocal cord are pearly white “v” shape bands of tissue. They are flexible and smooth allowing them to vary pitch, volume and quality. When we breath the vocal cords are open allowing 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. This causes vibrations over the edges of the vocal cords to create a sound. A steady stream of air is essential to keep the vibration going.

This sound is this then shaped through the vocal tract by our cheeks, lips and tongue into the sounds we want for speech.

## What impacts the voice

Vocal changes can be caused by a variety of factors, changing the sound of your voice e.g. hoarseness, weak, strained or breathy. It can affect how your throat feels e.g. dry, scratchy, sore, tight, or a feeling of something in the throat.

## How you can look after your voice

For high voice users consider some regular vocal warm-ups and vocal rest periods in your day.

For low voice users increase your voice use. Like other muscles they need gentle regular use. Try regular gentle humming, speaking or reading aloud.

## Colds, coughs and infections

- Avoid unnecessary talking and singing
- Drink plenty of fluids
- Gentle steam can reduce soreness
- Avoid whispering.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## Acid Reflux

- Avoid eating 3 hours before bed or exercise
- Limit food/drink that exacerbates reflux e.g. caffeine, alcohol, spicy foods, garlic, tomatoes, fatty foods
- Try to eat smaller meals
- Use a bed-wedge or raise the head of your bed.

## Breathing

Breath support is the foundation for a clear and healthy voice. Be mindful to take deep breaths when speaking or singing.

## Hydration

- Ensure regular sips of water during the day
- Aim to drink 3 pints /1.5 litres of fluid which does not contain caffeine or alcohol per day
- Steam inhalation can also help.

## Throat clearing and coughing.

Regular throat-clear or cough without producing phlegm may be a habit rather than a necessity. Breaking this habit reduces the risk of damage. Do this by:

- Sip of water to swallow away mucus
- Suck a sugar free sweet
- Do an effortful swallow
- Try to breathe through your nose, and out through pursed lips (pff)
- Distract your attention away from the irritation.

## Medication

Medication can dry the throat and affect voice quality, including Anti-depressants, statins, hyoscine, atropine and inhalers.

- Rinse you mouth and sip water after using a steroidal inhaler
- Use a spacer device for your inhaler where possible
- Consult your GP if any prescriptions seem to affect your voice
- Do not stop medication without medical advice.

## Background noise

Avoid speaking for long periods in noisy conditions and reduce background noise.

## Blocked sinuses/post-nasal drip

Mouth breathing has a dying effect and mucous dripping from the nose into the mouth can irritate the mouth. To help with this try:

- Inhaling steam
- Try nasal douche/saline spray
- Manage allergies (consult your GP).

## Tobacco and other drugs

These have a profound effect on the voice and continued smoking can lead to throat cancers.

- Stop smoking - if you have difficulty ask your GP for advice on smoking cessation
- Or call Quit your way on 0800 84 84 84 or visit www.QuitYourWay.scot
- Avoid smoky atmospheres.

## Tiredness, stress, emotions

Our voice reflects emotional states, if you identify that your voice problem is associated with stress, you should discuss this with your GP. Take time daily to relax, there are apps to help with relaxation including, “sorted”, “calm” and “insight timer”.

## Hot, dry and atmospheric irritants

- Humidify the environment around you; place bowls of water on or near a radiator
- Ventilate rooms when possible
- Use protective masks where appropriate.

## Useful websites

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| **British Voice Association**<br>https://britishvoiceassociation.org.uk/ | |
| **Physiotherapy for breathing pattern disorder**<br>www.physiotherapyforbpd.org.uk/ | |
| **How to take care of your voice \| NHS Fife**<br>www.nhsfife.org/services/all-services/speech-and-language-therapy/how-to-take-care-of-your-voice/ | |

## Contact Information

NHS Lothian Speech and Language Therapy contact details:

Edinburgh: 0131 242 1933

Midlothian: 0131 454 9544

East Lothian: 01620 642704

West Lothian: 01506 524191

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.