



Speech and Language Therapy

Taking Care of Your Voice

Hydration

Mucous membranes line the vocal tract and these need to be kept moist through drinking water. Keeping well-hydrated is crucial for vocal health. Water plumps out the cells in the vocal tract and vocal cords. National guidance suggests drinking 8 glasses of water per day.

Air conditioning, or dusty atmospheres, can dry out the vocal tract. If you work in an air-conditioned office, consider carrying out steam inhalations. Steam inhalations introduce moisture into the vocal tract and help keep the vocal folds hydrated.

Tip - Half fill a large bowl or sink with water that has just boiled. Sit comfortably and cover your head, shoulders and the bowl with a large towel. Breathe in and out through your mouth. Continue until the water stops steaming. Try to do this twice daily, or more often if your throat is especially irritated. For a quicker option when you are on the go or at work, fill a cup with steaming water. Two drops of camomile essential oil may be added if you wish as camomile contains a natural anti-inflammatory agent. Do not add any other oils, such as Olbas, to the water as these will irritate the vocal cords.

If you work in dusty environment, wear a dust mask and also consider carrying out daily steam inhalations.

Caffeinated drinks such as tea, coffee and fizzy drinks do not hydrate the vocal tract or vocal cords. In fact, they have a drying effect. A dry, dehydrated voice can make the voice sound hoarse. Switch to decaffeinated drinks where possible.

Diet

Dairy products with high fat content tend to encourage production of thicker mucus. Thick mucus in the throat can lead to excessive throat clearing, which can cause damage to the vocal cords.

Reflux

Reflux or indigestion may affect voice quality and cause voice hoarseness, discomfort, burning, post nasal drip, shortness of breath or a feeling of a lump in your throat. Spicy or acidic foods may increase the likelihood of reflux. Try to limit spicy or acidic foods and drinks. When eating spicy or acidic food, you should drink plenty of water. You should discuss your symptoms with your doctor as they may be able to prescribe medication to help.

If you suffer from reflux or indigestion, also try the following advice:

- Elevate the head of the bed by six inches by placing it on bricks or blocks
- Do not eat for three hours before you go to bed
- Always eat sitting upright
- Avoid constricting clothing
- Avoid coffee (all types), tea, beer, spirits, milk, cola, sweets, chewing gum, peppermint, high fat products, chocolate, tomatoes and citrus fruits
- Avoid strenuous exercise after food.

Throat clearing and coughing

Excessive throat clearing can cause damage to the vocal cords. The vocal cords protect themselves by producing a thick layer of mucus. The more mucus a person has, the more likely they are to clear their throat. To reduce this:

- Take sips of water throughout the day. The water aims to reduce the thickness of the mucus. This will help you swallow the mucus away instead of clearing your throat.
- Suck on sugar-free sweets or mints throughout the day. Sugar-free products promote saliva production meaning you are swallowing more frequently.
- Steam inhalations once or twice a day with boiling hot water for 10 – 15 minutes. Steam inhalation help to thin down the mucus in your throat. It is also very hydrating for the vocal tract.
- Try to drink 8 cups of water a day. Again, this will thin down the thick mucus and keep the vocal tract hydrated.
- Breathe in slowly for 3 seconds, hold for 3 seconds, blow out slowly for 3 seconds, put your chin to the chest and swallow.
- You could be suffering from acid reflux. Speak with your speech and Language Therapist (SLT) further about the symptoms.

Coughing involves forceful closure of the vocal folds and can become habitual. Try the following if you find that you cough excessively:

- Cough with a gentle huff
- Try swallowing and sipping water instead of coughing

Alcohol, Tobacco and Drugs

Alcohol has a drying effect on the vocal tract and vocal fold mucosa (*Mucosa is the skin that makes up the vocal cords*). Some alcohol has a high acidic content, therefore increasing the risk of reflux. Try diluting wines and spirits or follow an alcoholic drink with a soft drink. Alcohol is also a carcinogenic, meaning that it can increase your risk of cancer. If you do have voice difficulties, avoiding alcohol consumption is recommended. If you want further advice about reducing or quitting alcohol consumption, please speak with your GP.

Smoking dries and irritates the vocal tract. It can damage the tissues of the larynx and cause changes including pre-cancerous and laryngeal cancer.

You should, therefore, try to:

- Stop smoking. If you cannot, seek help from Stop Smoking clinics via the GP.

Recreational drugs can cause damage to the voice in a number of ways – irritation, heat and toxicity. Some also affect breathing. Speak with your GP if you want support.

Throat lozenges

Avoid medicated throat lozenges as they numb the throat which allows you to do more damage. Menthol lozenges also have a drying effect.

Tip - Sucking sugar-free sweets (boiled sweets not medicated) and chewing sugar-free gum helps to stimulate saliva flow. Many people find that pieces of fruit relieve dryness as well. Try orange, lemon or grapefruit. If these are too acidic try apple, pear or cucumber. Pineapple, watermelon and mango are also good alternatives to soothe a dry throat.

Fatigue, stress and bereavement

Our emotions can affect our voices. Stress can increase muscle tension (excessive tension in the voice box, back and neck) and it can dry out secretions. Talking is more difficult when we are tired or stressed.

If your voice feels tired or strained, try to rest it. This is your body's way of telling you to rest your voice.

Tip - Find some time during the day to rest your voice, for example find a quiet space during lunch or have lunch in the car.

Breathing and Speaking

In order to create voice, we require adequate breath support from our lungs. Sometimes, we do not take enough breath when speaking. Try not speak in sentences that are too long so you are left to force out the words on too little breath.

Tip - Take deeper breaths and reduce sentence length.

Contact Numbers:

We hope you have found this information useful. If you have any further questions, please contact your SLT.

Your speech and language therapist is: _____.

Please ring the Speech and Language Therapy department on 01305 255165 for assistance.

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If you have feedback regarding the accuracy of the information contained in this leaflet, or if you would like a list of references used to develop this leaflet, please email pals@dchft.nhs.uk



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