

Vocal hygiene: looking after your voice

A patient's advice sheet

Why have I been given this advice sheet?

After your procedure your voice may sound different. This leaflet aims to provide you with information to **reduce** or **eliminate** environmental and behavioural factors that may **harm your voice**.

What do I do if my voice does not improve?

If you are concerned that your voice has not returned to normal, please contact your GP and asked to be referred to an ear, nose and throat (ENT) doctor.

Things you can do which help:

Hydration

- Try to drink 2 litres (3 ½ pints) of liquid a day (not including coffee, alcohol or fizzy drinks). This will prevent dehydration of the vocal cords.

Tip: Carry a bottle of water with you or ensure that you always have a glass of water on your desk.

Save your voice not your legs

- Avoid shouting over background noise or from room to room. This can strain your voice.

Tip: Walk and find the person you are calling, or turn down the TV when having a conversation.

Voice rest

- If your voice feels tired or strained then 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 during lunch, or in the car.

Steaming

- This helps to introduce moisture into the vocal tract and helps 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 or one tablespoon of camomile flowers may be added if you wish as camomile contains a natural anti-inflammatory agent. Do not add any other oils, such as Olbus, to the water as these will irritate the vocal cords.

Hot compress

- This will help to soothe an inflamed or painful throat and to improve the blood circulation, which helps to reduce inflammation.

Tip: Fill a basin with hot water, soak and wring out a face flannel, fold it up and press it to your throat. Hold it there until it cools down. Repeat three to four times. If you find this helpful, try to do it several times a day, especially when your throat is sore or tired.

Get enough sleep

- Fatigue can cause the voice to sound hoarse.

Take adequate breath when speaking

- Take enough breath when speaking - do 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.

Things to avoid:

Excessive throat clearing

- Try not to clear your throat unnecessarily. Constantly clearing your throat puts strain on the vocal cords as they are 'bashed' together. Also, it can create excessive mucous and lead to a further need to clear your throat.

Tip: Try to swallow, take a drink of water or suck a sugar-free sweet instead of clearing your throat.

Caffeine and alcohol

- Avoid too much coffee, fizzy drinks and alcohol. These can dry out the vocal cords.

Tip: Try drinking decaffeinated tea or coffee or follow an alcoholic drink with a soft drink.

Smoking

- Stop smoking. If you can't give up, cut down. Smoking irritates and damages the vocal folds.

Tip: Visit your GP to support you to stop smoking.

Irritants

- Avoid chemical irritants and smoky, dry and dusty atmospheres as they may dry out the vocal cords.

Tip: Wear a dust mask if you are in a dusty environment. Solvent based glues, perfumes, felt tip pen fumes, chlorine, paint, varnishes, bleach and other cleaning products can contain strong chemical fumes. Follow product advice on ventilation.

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 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.

Gastric reflux

- Reflux or indigestion may affect voice quality and cause discomfort or a feeling of a lump in your throat.

Tip: Spicy or acidic foods may increase the likelihood of reflux that can irritate the throat and cause hoarseness. 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 have further concerns about your voice please contact you GP, ENT Doctor, Specialist Nurse or Speech and Language Therapist