

Looking after the voice

How is voice produced?

Your lungs, larynx (voice box, which is made up of two vocal folds), and mouth are the parts of your body that help you produce voice. The air from your lungs passes through your larynx making your vocal folds vibrate. This vibration makes a sound that is the source of your voice. The sound travels up through your throat, nose, and mouth where it is articulated into words by the movements of your lips, teeth, and tongue.

What causes voice problems?

There are many things that can cause discomfort and changes in your voice quality, a few examples are: surgery, medical treatments, infections, intubation, muscle changes, shouting, and stress. An ear, nose, and throat (ENT) specialist can examine your vocal folds to see what the problem is and explain to you why your voice has changed.

Where to get more support?

If you have a voice problem for more than three weeks, then see your GP for a referral to ENT. You can ask to be seen in a Joint Voice Clinic (JVC) which is an ENT appointment with a Speech Therapist present. To find a list of clinics look on the British Voice Association Website here: <https://britishvoiceassociation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Voice-Clinics-Information-Booklet-April-2021.pdf>

What can you do to look after your voice?

Hydrate:

If we are well hydrated then fluids tend to be more easily absorbed by the cells that need it, including the vocal folds. You should be aiming to 'pee pale'. Drinking plenty hydrates the whole body and steaming helps to moisturise the vocal folds directly.

- Aim to drink two litres of fluids every day. It is best to take small sips regularly throughout the day. It is ideal if some of these are de-caffeinated. Alcoholic drinks do not count towards this amount.
- Steam 3 times a day for 3 minutes by breathing in hot steam via the mouth i.e. when



showering or having a bath, from a cup, or over a bowl. Do not add anything (i.e. oils) to the water.

- If you feel dry when you sleep, then you can use a humidifier or when you have the central heating on then put a bowl of water on your radiator or a wet towel during the night to make the air more moist.
- Open the windows to let in fresh air.

Protect:

There are some things that we do which make the vocal folds come together harshly rather than as a gentle wave action. This can cause damage and make your voice problem worse.

- Try not to clear your throat or cough during the day. Try a hard swallow, sipping water, or a sniff and slow prolonged 'blow' out instead (like blowing out a candle).
- Try not to talk over background noise or shout to people in other rooms. Turn off background noise when you are talking e.g., TV or radio. If you need to talk to a large room of people for work consider using a microphone.
- Substitute any pain-relieving lozenges for sugar-free sweets or chewing gum.
- Rest your voice if it feels 'tired' or worse for any reason. This means not speaking, unless it is absolutely necessary, and when you do, use a gentle voice rather than a whisper. Try using emails or texts instead of calls.

Keep healthy:

The vocal folds were primarily created for airway protection when you swallow, and voicing is a secondary action. When you swallow the vocal folds come together and the muscles around the larynx squeeze. When they feel under threat at all, these muscles will revert to their primary purpose and squeeze to protect themselves causing neck tension. Some substances may cause inflammation or damage to the delicate linings of the throat and vocal folds too, so you may feel very sensitive in the throat.

- Eat well.
- Take all your medications.
- If you suffer from heartburn or acid reflux then take Gaviscon Advance before you go to bed after you have brushed your teeth and had any last food/drinks. Try not to eat within the two hours before going to bed. Sleep at a slight angle so that your stomach is lower than your throat.
- Avoid things that dry and irritate your vocal folds such as smoking, excessive alcohol, and dusty environments.



Breathe well:

The nose acts like an air conditioning system: filtering, warming, and moistening the air that goes down to your lungs, making sure it is good quality. Breathing through your nose also stimulates natural nitric oxide which lowers your blood pressure and heart rate making you feel better and calmer. It also helps to improve your dental hygiene and keeps moisture in your mouth and throat where you can often feel dry.

- Breathe in through your nose as often as possible. Take gentle breaths in and out to calm your breathing at rest.

Pace yourself:

Often people try to do too much and then the voice feels tired and fatigued. If you think of your voice use like currency, i.e. you only have a certain amount of 'money' to spend per day on all your vocal activities, it can help you to pace yourself. Any vocal activity that you do uses effort, but you might only be thinking about the 'high energy' ones like singing, teaching, or presenting. However, all the talking you are doing when you go out, cheering at sports events, or at work counts too. You can 'borrow' money from the next day, but you will need to find a way of resting to preserve the voice to balance back out again. Remember that it is the same larynx that you are using for all these activities and what you do with it in all these activities will impact each other.

- Pace yourself during the day/week to not tire your voice out so easily.

Relax:

The hyoid in the larynx, which holds the vocal folds, is the only bone in the body suspended purely by muscle. These are linked to the muscles of the neck, shoulders, face, and back. The link between the mind and body is very strong and how we feel emotionally and physically impacts on the tension of these muscles. It can also affect you in other ways, like causing headaches or stomach issues. Relaxing your mind and body is the best support for this.

- Find things to do that you find mentally and physically relaxing.
- Take regular exercise—get your whole body moving in ways that feel comfortable and natural and that you enjoy.
- Try and reduce your stress levels as this can cause your muscles to tense.
- Complete head and neck stretches every day, and periodically during the day, with gentle massage in any areas that feel particularly tense.
- When it is cold wear a scarf to keep the muscles warm when you are outside.



Did you know that there are seven different types of rest? Thinking about these can help you to find some ideas that might work for you:

- Physical—which can be passive (naps) or active (yoga, stretching, walking).
- Mental—notepad for any thoughts causing you to worry and creating time for those thoughts to be processed (worry time) or processed during your workday.
- Sensory—getting away from electronic screens or exploring your senses in other ways like walking/grounding yourself in nature, feeling the sun on your face, feeling the wind.
- Creative—enjoying the arts and practicing gratitude and awe.
- Emotional—express your feelings and reduce people pleasing.
- Social—either having time by yourself or spending time with those you enjoy.
- Spiritual rest—connecting beyond the physical and mental, this may look like prayer, meditation, or community involvement. Anything that adds love, acceptance, and purpose.

How to rest as a busy person:

It can sometimes feel very difficult to rest during busy times. Remember that you need regular rest and recharge, like a battery. Here are some ideas of how to get moments of rest when you feel too busy.

- Close your eyes for sensory rest.
- Swap scrolling for reading or another non-electronic activity.
- Slow down movement and speech.
- Extend your exhale.
- Reduce multi-tasking.
- Prioritise, downgrade, or delegate items to others.
- Speak to a friend.
- Hum to calm your nervous system.

What a Speech Therapist can do to help?

A Speech and Language Therapist will help guide you as to which recommendations you should focus on most as well as providing voice exercises that are targeted at improving voice production. All the advice above will help you to look after your voice. Try to do them with a 'little and often' approach periodically during each day.

If you would like more information, please contact me on kirsty@restorevoice.co.uk.