

Looking after your voice

Information for you



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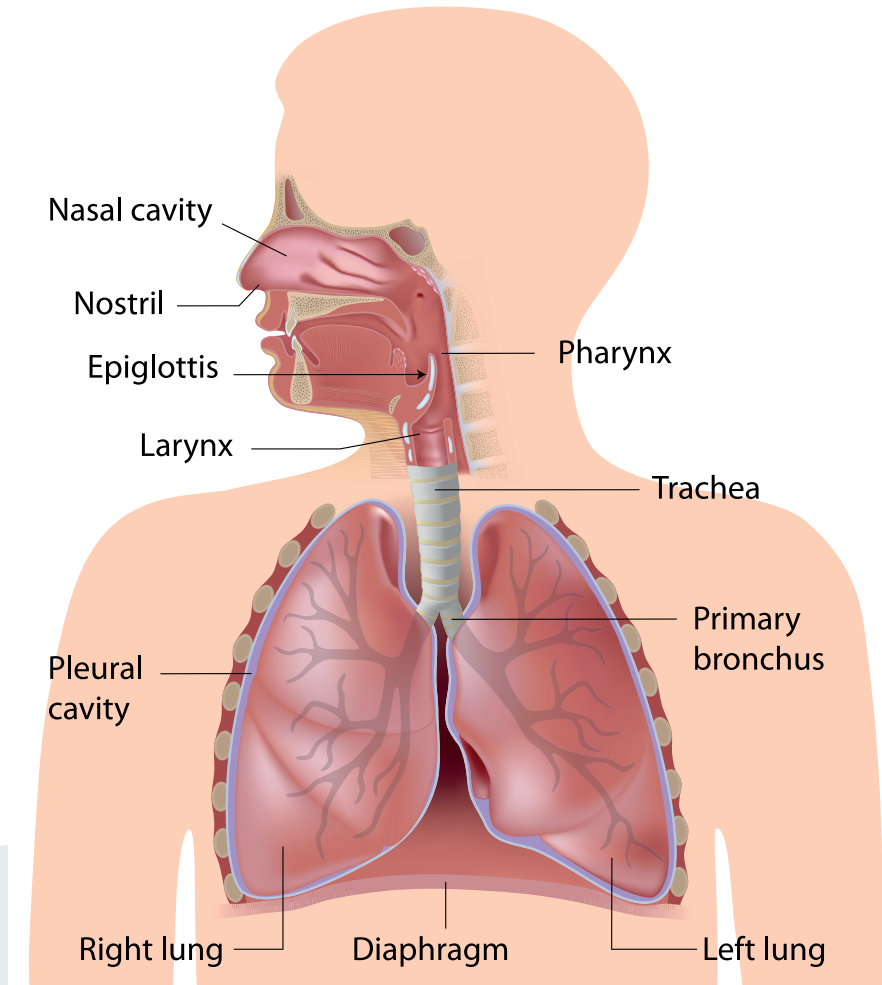
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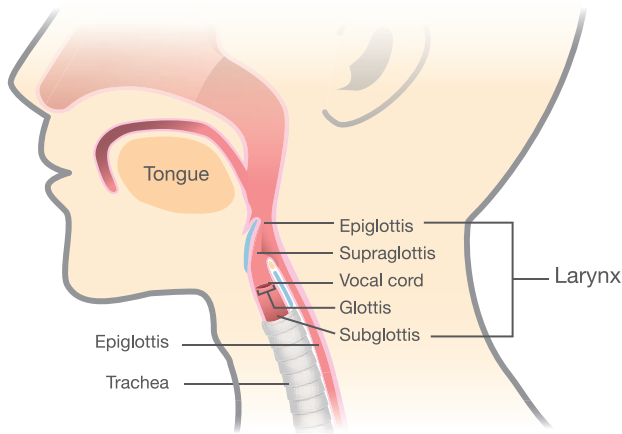


How the voice works

- Our voice is not usually something we have to think about. We learn to speak as children and carry on talking as adults!
- But producing voice is actually a complex process involving many different systems and muscles.
- The power to produce voice comes from the air in our lungs. When we breathe out, air from our lungs is pushed through the voice box or 'larynx' - this is where our vocal cords 'sit' (just behind the Adam's apple).
- To breathe, the vocal cords stay open, allowing air to pass through them and into our lungs or out through the mouth and nose. To produce voice, the vocal cords close and vibrate against each other.
- The vocal cords are made of folds of muscle surrounded by mucus membrane (special lining). If there is incorrect tension in the vocal cords or the muscles of the larynx, our voice box is unable to work properly.
- If there is any disruption in our breathing pattern, or in the way our vocal cords move and vibrate, we will have problems with our voice.

The respiratory system



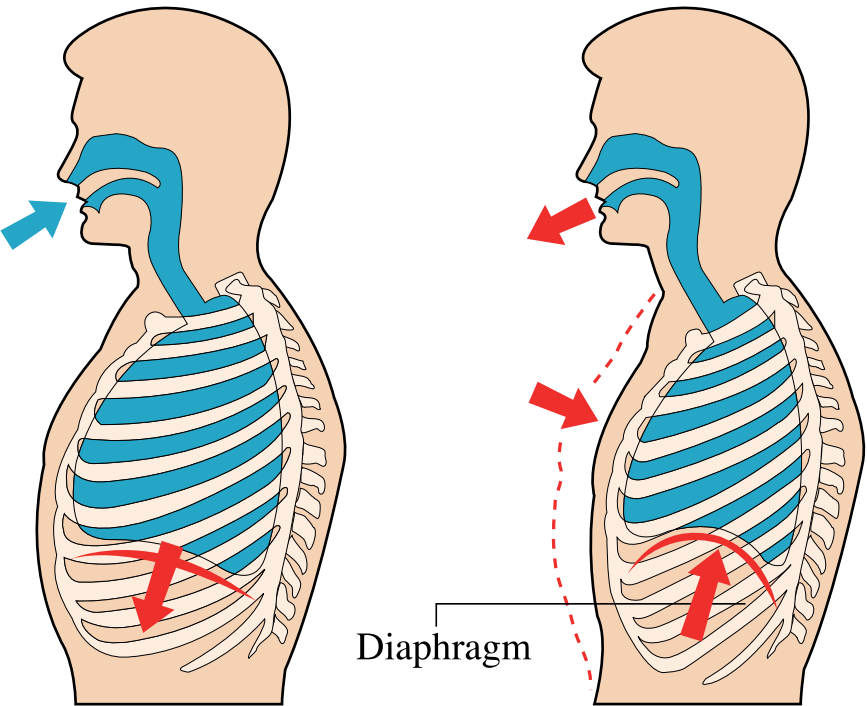


Larynx Anatomy

Breathing

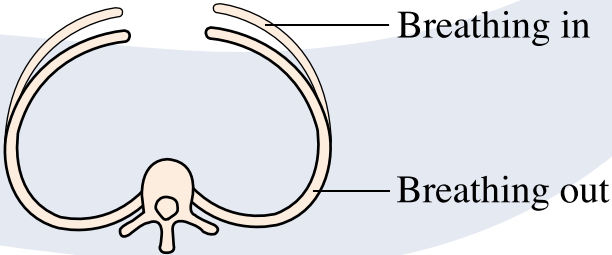
- Breathing is the power source for speech without it we cannot use our voice
- Inefficient breathing and poor breathing techniques will affect voice quality
- Good breathing techniques aim to:
 - Maximise efficiency of the lungs
 - Maximise control of the air flow through the larynx
 - Breathing efficiently
- The lungs are pear shaped organs and hold the greatest volume of air at the bottom
- To make the best use of our lungs we must ensure that we fill the bottom of our lungs each time we inhale. This is known as “Deep Breathing”.
- The following exercises will help you to develop a Deep Breathing pattern

Respiration



Breathing in:
diaphragm contracts

Breathing out:
diaphragm relaxes



Rib pair positions during
inspiration and expiration

Deep (Diaphragmatic) Breathing

- Check posture and stay relaxed!
- Place one hand above your waist
- As you breathe in and your lungs fill with air, you should feel your hand (and stomach) move out.
- As you breathe out and you empty your lungs, you should feel your hand (and stomach) move in.
- When you are relaxed for example, when you're about to fall asleep, check your breathing - you will find it is a deep (diaphragmatic) breathing pattern.

Relaxation can help your voice too!

- Many people find it hard to relax, even when they are doing nothing!
- The purpose of relaxation is to allow muscles to become lengthened and flexible (like elastic bands), free of excess tension.
- A relaxed body needs a relaxed mind and therefore we need time and space to develop our skills in the art of relaxing.
- Relaxation calms the mind and helps people to 'cope better' with life's up's and down's.
- It also helps to reduce the impact of daily stresses imposed on the body and helps the body heal itself.

- There are a number of ways to relax, from meditation to swimming, but it's often difficult for us to take time out for ourselves on a daily basis.
- Voice problems can be made worse by stress and tension, so it's important to ensure that the muscles of the larynx, neck and shoulders remain as relaxed and free as possible.
- Try the following movements, to help stretch and lengthen your muscles.

Relaxation Movements

- Sit in a comfortable, quiet place
- Always move slowly and gently.
- There should be no pain or discomfort. If there is – STOP!

1. Head Movements

- Slowly lower your head until your chin is near your chest. Hold this position for 3 seconds, feeling the stretch in the back of your neck. Gently raise your head, concentrating on the release of tension.
- Slowly turn your head to the left (as far as is comfortable). Hold this position for 3 seconds. Slowly move your head back to the centre.

Repeat, turning your head to the right.

2. Shoulder Movements

- Slowly raise your shoulders up towards your ears. Hold this position for 3 seconds and then slowly relax them down, focusing on the release of tension
- Slowly raise your shoulders up towards your ears, then rotate your shoulders backwards in a circular motion
- Repeat each movement 3 times. Shake your shoulders after each exercise to release any residual tension.

Looking After Your Voice

Do:

- Drink plenty of water or juice to keep the throat and vocal cords hydrated. Ideally 1.5–2 litres per day
- Moisten your throat. Try sucking lozenges or boiled sweets, but avoid medicated pastilles which hide symptoms by numbing pain, without treating the underlying cause. Try steam inhalation (get a bowl of hot water and breathe in the steam), or try a warm drink (for example honey & lemon).
- Keep rooms humidified and ventilated to minimise dry air and vocal irritants. Use a commercial humidifier, a bowl of water near radiators, or keep

house plants

- Rest your voice especially when tired (it's easy to strain muscles!), or before times of high vocal demand. Learn to be sensitive to early signs of vocal fatigue, hoarseness, dryness or throat tension and 'look after the voice' early.
- Treat heartburn / indigestion (reflux): Reflux can cause a burning sensation in the throat, irritation or soreness. Try to avoid hot, spicy or acidic foods (especially at bedtime), sleep in an upright position, try antacids or speak to your GP.
- Use a Spacer with asthma inhalers (see your GP or asthma nurse). Rinse or gargle, then drink water after using inhalers
- Use good speaking strategies: Speak slowly and clearly (not more loudly!). Take regular breaths when talking and ensure that listeners are facing you. Reduce background noise and use a microphone/amplifier/PA system if needed.
- Seek voice training via a Speech Therapist, vocal coach or singing teacher, if you are a singer or lecturer.
- Relax! Remember that your voice reacts to emotional stress, so try to find ways to identify and combat anxiety and strain. Note any tension in your neck, chest, shoulders, jaw, face and pay attention to your posture (sitting, standing, walking).

Don't:

- Don't cough or throat clear habitually. If you do this too often, you produce more and more mucous on your vocal cords and they become inflamed and sore. Instead, take a sip of water (cold, fizzy water may be helpful), swallow or suck a boiled sweet.
- Don't Smoke and avoid second-hand smoke where possible. Smoke dries your throat, irritates the vocal cords and can cause cancer. Try to reduce the number of cigarettes you smoke, or stop altogether.
- Don't shout or force your voice (especially over background noise, or when the voice is tired or sore). If you can, use another way to get someone's attention and always use good communication strategies.

Try to avoid:

- Avoid alcohol and caffeine. These 'dry out' the throat (both are 'diuretics' - take water out of the body) and make the throat more dry and prone to irritation and damage.
- Avoid whispering, as this strains and tires the voice. Instead, try to speak very quietly and gently, or avoid speaking altogether (could you send an e-mail or text instead?)

- Avoid dry / dusty / smoky atmospheres and fumes (for example, paint, aerosol sprays). Try to: Open windows; keep rooms humidified, sip water, use a damp cloth to dust, wear a mask for painting.
- Avoid singing if your voice is weak or tired, or you have a cold. Never sing beyond your comfortable range and never strain or force the voice. Use a microphone/amplifier if needed.
- Be aware: Hormone levels can change the vocal cords, by causing them to swell. Pitch will lower and the voice may be hoarse or husky. This can happen with thyroid problems, menstruation, taking the contraceptive pill and taking Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT).

Specific voice problems include Globus Pharyngeus and Laryngitis. Please see our specific leaflets on these or seek help from your local speech and language therapist.

Useful Contacts:

- The Voice Care Network (UK): www.voicecare.org.uk
- Voice Disorders Website: www.lary.org.uk

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