

Hoarseness and Voice Change

Our larynx ('voice box') and pharynx ('throat', 'gullet') sit right beside each other just below our mouth, and above the oesophagus ('food pipe') and trachea ('wind pipe'). Because of their close location, people with dysfunction of one will commonly have problems with the other.

Warning Symptoms

Although the majority of throat/voice box symptoms are NOT related to dangerous conditions, your doctor should be informed *immediately* if you experience the following symptoms:

- Progressive difficulty with swallowing solid or liquid foods, especially if you are losing weight as a result.
- Blood in the sputum or spit
- Permanent change in the voice that never returns to a normal quality
- Any difficulty breathing, especially if progressive and for no obvious reason

Typical Problems of the Voice Box

- Change in voice quality: hoarseness, breaking, weakness etc. This might be a permanent change, or might be intermittent with normal voice production in between.
- Cough
- 'Noisy breathing': either a wheeze or sometime a single noise a little like a musical note
- Shortness of breath
- Coughing or choking when eating/drinking: this can be because food or fluid is going 'down the wrong way', and can predispose to chest infections

Typical Problems of the Throat

- A feeling of a lump in the throat, or something being stuck there
- Difficulty getting food to pass down into the food pipe when swallowing
- Pain with swallowing
- Reflux or regurgitation of food
- Blood in the spit
- Excessive phlegm in the throat
- A feeling of post-nasal dripping

Common Causes of Voice Box and Throat Problems

- Poor hydration: our throat easily dries out when we don't drink enough fluid.
- Reflux ('heartburn, indigestion, dyspepsia'): although our food pipe is lined with tough, reflux-resistant lining, our throat and voice box are not designed to cope with even a small amount of reflux of stomach contents. Sometimes, the only sign of your reflux might be the above symptoms, without classic 'heartburn'.
- Excessive voice use: either due to work, hobbies (e.g. singing or acting), or just because your team was playing a close game last weekend.
- Smoking: not only is this the main risk factor for cancers of the throat and voice box, but even without causing cancer the smoke can irritate the area enough to cause all the above symptoms. Do you need yet another reason to quit?
- Local irritation/trauma: this can be from a respiratory infection, a breathing tube placed as part of an unrelated operation, or from an accident with the throat/neck being hit.
- Some asthma inhalers can cause mild throat irritation and voice changes. Speak with your doctor if you think this is a factor.
- Nerve damage: from neck surgery, a stroke or ageing.

Treatment

Your ENT doctor will talk to you about your specific treatment, but most people benefit from the following measures:

- Hydration: aim to drink 2 litres of non-alcoholic, non-caffeinated fluid each day.
- Reflux:
 - Take anti-reflux medications as prescribed by your doctor. A twice daily regimen has been shown to be more effective for voice box and throat symptoms than once daily, and should be continued for at least six weeks. If there has been an improvement, reduce your dose to the minimum needed to keep your symptoms in control, and accept that you may need to vary your dose over time for best outcomes. If there is no change after six weeks, benefit is unlikely to occur and you should stop taking the medication (if not taking it for another reason).
 - Keep your weight in the healthy weight range.
 - Eat small meals frequently rather than a few very large meals. Avoid fat, alcohol and caffeine, all known to increase reflux, as well as any specific foods you find make your reflux worse. Eat your last meal at least two hours before bed.
 - Consider propping the head of the bed up on bricks to help gravity work with you at night.
- Voice issues: a Speech Therapist will be very helpful in identifying specific vocal habits you have that are straining your voice unnecessarily, and suggesting strategies that will help protect your voice and improve it.
- Quit smoking – seriously, how many reasons do you need?

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