



Information & Expert Advice on Voice Disorders

What is a voice disorder?

A voice disorder is a change in normal voice quality for a long period of time. If your voice quality has changed and stayed that way for more than two weeks (and you are not sick at the time), you may have a voice disorder. The technical name for a voice disorder is *dysphonia* (*dis-foh-nee-a*).

What does a voice disorder sound like?

Most people with voice disorders describe their voice as “hoarse”, “rough”, “shaky” or “weak”. Many people also say they have a feeling of tightness/tension, dryness or a lump in the throat.

Who gets voice disorders?

Voice disorders can happen to anyone, but are most common among people that use their voices heavily.

This would include groups like teachers, lecturers, singers and secretaries. Sometimes people say that their voice got worse after a chest infection or a stressful event and has stayed bad.

A voice disorder can be caused by long-term conditions that affect breathing (e.g. asthma or Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease). It can also happen as a result of a stroke or a disease that affects the brain, like Parkinson’s Disease.

Sometimes children will have voice disorders, either because of something they were born with, or because of how they use their voice.

People with voice disorders often find that they are extremely stressful. We rely on our voice in everyday life and often take it for granted. For children, a voice disorder might mean not being able to play with friends. For adults, it can affect our careers if we need our voice for our job or to socialise.

It is not uncommon for people with voice disorders to be worried and upset because their voice is letting them down.

Who diagnoses a voice disorder?

Usually a person with a voice disorder will visit their GP, who will refer them on to an Ear, Nose and Throat (ENT) specialist. The ENT doctor will usually examine the patient by passing a scope inside the throat to see what's wrong.

If voice difficulties are found, the ENT doctor may refer the patient to a Speech and Language Therapist (SLT) to manage the voice disorder.

What happens in Speech and Language Therapy?

Your Speech and Language Therapist will take different measurements of your voice quality, ask about how you use your voice during the day and ask how it is affecting your life. This is sometimes done by using a computer to record and analyse your voice and going through checklists and questionnaires. Your therapist will also judge your voice quality, based on their experience of working with people that have disordered voices.

You will then receive advice on how to stop your voice from getting worse and how you can take simple measures (like the ones listed below) to help your voice to heal. This is called "vocal hygiene advice".

Therapy also involves doing some exercises to improve your voice. These exercises are designed to loosen up your throat and warm up your voice before you use it. They are also designed to help you speak in a more relaxed way, so you don't strain your voice.

After doing your exercises for some time, your voice will be measured again to see what improvements have taken place. Your voice will be compared with what it was like at the very beginning to check for improvements. Therapists will always make sure that your voice doesn't just sound better, but that you feel better about it and that it is performing the way you want it to.

How can I help my voice?

Here is some general advice on how to keep your voice healthy:

- Drink plenty of water throughout the day to keep your voicebox hydrated.
- Inhaling steam can also help your voicebox by moistening it. You can do this by hanging a towel over your head and filling a bowl with hot water.

- Don't spend too much time in dry, dusty or hot atmospheres. Open a window and air out the room if this describes where you live or work. Putting a bowl of water on top of a radiator in winter can moisten the air and make it less dry.
- Stop smoking. Apart from being generally bad for your health, cigarette smoke passes through the voicebox and irritates it.
- If you use chemicals (e.g. cleaning sprays), leave the room after you spray them and return when they have settled.
- If your voice feels strained – don't push it harder to get it to work! Take a rest.
- See whether you can take breaks from using your voice throughout the day and try to use your voice only when it is strong.
- Don't be tempted to whisper if your voice is weak. This can make it worse.
- Turn down background noise (e.g. TV, radio) and be close to the person you are talking with so that you don't have to strain your voice.
- A number of people with voice disorders also have acid reflux. Sometimes cutting down on spicy food, caffeine, fizzy drinks and alcohol can help. If you think you might have acid reflux, it is important to speak to your doctor.
- Be aware that gargling your throat, taking honey or taking lozenges is unlikely to help a voice disorder. Your voicebox is not somewhere that these can reach!
- When using the telephone, make sure that you don't clamp it between your ear and shoulder. When you bend your neck like this and speak, the voicebox has to work harder.
- If you feel tension or strain in your neck, it might help to do some gentle stretching exercises by rolling your head side to side and up and down. This should be a gentle roll, not a hard push.
- Don't be afraid to tell people that you have a voice disorder and that they need to be more accommodating with you. Voice disorders can be very problematic and need to be taken seriously.
- Try to manage stress - The more stressed you are, the more stressed your voicebox becomes and the worse your voice gets. Remember that help is at hand and your Speech and Language Therapist is there to support you. Many people with voice disorders find general relaxation exercises to be very beneficial.

Who to contact

If you are concerned about your voice and would like more information, please contact your local primary care team or health centre. You can ask your public health nurse, GP or local Speech and Language Therapist for advice.

Useful websites: www.iaslt.ie
(Irish Association of Speech and Language Therapists)
www.isti.ie
(Independent Speech-Language Therapists of Ireland).