

HOARSENESS

What is hoarseness?

The larynx (voice box) is a very sensitive organ and any alteration in the shape, position, mobility or surface of the vocal cords can result in hoarseness. Hoarseness, if severe enough, can significantly affect our ability to communicate with others and can greatly affect our quality of life. Even mild changes can have an impact, especially in professional voice users such as singers, actors, voice talent, performers and the like.

We tend to take our voices for granted and expect our voice to always be clear on demand. Like any other body part, however, the larynx is a collection of muscles, tendons, joints and nerves. If we use them improperly or use them too much, they will give out.

How is hoarseness treated?

Often hoarseness occurs after or during a cold. When this happens, your voice will likely come back to normal within 1-2 weeks, especially if you follow the instructions below. More chronic causes of hoarseness need to be evaluated by an ENT physician.

Do not abuse or misuse your voice: Your voice and your vocal folds are somewhat fragile. In every day communication, be sure to avoid habitual yelling, screaming, or cheering. Try not to talk loudly in situations with significant background noise or noisy environments. At loud restaurants, for example, most people abuse their voice accidentally just talking to the person next to them. If you are recovering from a voice disorder, such as an acute laryngitis, it is **best to avoid loud environments** until your voice is fully recovered. In this way, you will prevent yourself from abusing your voice further. **Resting your voice is extremely important.** If you have a swollen and sprained ankle, for example, you don't want to walk on it or the problem will get worse.

Try to speak softly without whispering. Whispering strains the muscles and joints of the voice box and can lead to further injury.

Minimize throat clearing: Clearing your throat can be compared to slapping or slamming the vocal cords together. Consequently, excessive throat clearing can cause vocal cord injury and subsequent hoarseness. An alternative to voice clearing is taking a small sip of water or simply swallowing to clear the secretions from the throat and alleviate the need for throat clearing or coughing. The most common reason for excessive throat clearing is an unrecognized medical condition causing one to clear their throat too much. Common causes of chronic throat clearing include gastroesophageal reflux, laryngopharyngeal reflux disease, sinus and/or allergic disease.

Drink water (stay well hydrated): Keeping your body well hydrated by **drinking** plenty of fluid each day (6-8 glasses) is essential to maintaining a healthy voice. The vocal cords vibrate extremely fast even with the most simple sound production; remaining hydrated optimizes the throat's mucous production, aiding vocal cord lubrication. To maintain sufficient hydration **avoid or moderate substances that cause dehydration. These include alcohol and caffeinated beverages (coffee, tea, soda). Also avoid medications that can cause thickening of the mucous such as antihistamines (Claritin, Allegra, Zyrtec, Benadryl, etc...) and decongestants (Sudafed, pseudoephedrine, phenylephrine...).**

Do not smoke: It is well known that smoking leads to lung or throat cancer. Primary and secondhand smoke that is breathed in passes by the vocal cords causing significant irritation and swelling of the vocal cords. This will permanently change voice quality, nature, and capabilities.

Your voice is an extremely valuable resource and is the most commonly used form of communication. Our voices are invaluable for both our social interaction as well as for most people's occupation. Proper care and use of your voice will give you the best chance for having a healthy voice for your entire lifetime.

Occasionally, despite the above measures, some people still have problems with their voice. An ear, nose and throat doctor should look at your vocal folds (cords) to make sure your problems are not because of something serious, especially if you are a smoker. Sometimes, **voice therapy** will be recommended. This involves meeting with a voice or speech therapist to evaluate your speech and teach you exercises to minimize strain and damage to your voice box.