

EAR, NOSE & THROAT

Losing your voice

The voice is a sensitive instrument that needs to be carefully nurtured in order for it to function well.



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Losing your voice is frustrating as the ability to speak is vital for communication. Voice loss is often referred to as hoarseness, an all-encompassing term that includes voice breaks, a lower-than-normal pitch, inability to hit the high notes (for singers), increased effort while speaking, inability to project one's voice, early-onset voice fatigue and pain when speaking.

Causes

The most common cause of hoarseness is voice misuse and abuse. This arises from prolonged talking, shouting, inadequate hydration, insufficient voice rest and persistent coughing. The problem is prevalent among teachers, army personnel, lawyers and bankers. Misuse of the voice could also lead to vocal cord lesions which include vocal nodules, polyps, cysts and oedema.

Other causes of voice injury include the regurgitation of acid from the stomach (acid reflux) and nasal congestion from nasal allergies and sinus infections. Acid reflux causes inflammation of the vocal cords and the production of excessive throat phlegm. This leads to persistent throat clearing and cough, which can injure the vocal cords. A congested nose will affect the resonance and voice projection, leading to excessive neck tension during voice production and consequent vocal cord injury.

Hoarseness often accompanies a common cold. Our vocal cords become inflamed (acute laryngitis), and an accompanying cough and blocked nose aggravate the problem.

Long-term smoking and frequent alcohol ingestion increase the risk of developing

vocal cord cancer. These patients will have progressive hoarseness. Sometimes, breathing is also difficult and noisy.

Although less common, vocal cord paralysis occurs after cancer, surgery or accidents. This causes the voice to be weak and breathy.

The most common way we abuse our voice is through constant throat clearing or coughing. Whispering is another way we injure our voice without realising it. Whispering causes muscle tension in our voicebox, leading to further injury.

Treatment

When you experience acute voice loss, you should immediately rest the voice. For common voice misuse and abuse injuries, it should take about three days for the voice to recover. Drink lots of water and avoid reflux-causing food.

If the hoarseness persists for more than two weeks, it is advisable to consult an ENT specialist. Your ENT doctor may recommend voice therapy to rehabilitate your voice. Your voicing habits and patterns, the correct use of resonance, balancing the correct airflow through your vocal cords and minimising muscle tension are all addressed during voice therapy.


If hoarseness persists for too long without seeking treatment,

the vocal cords can become scarred and stiff, leading to a raspy voice. Your ENT doctor will need to examine you to ascertain the degree of damage. In most cases, treating any underlying medical problem (like reflux or nasal congestion), and minimising vocal abuse and misuse will help but surgery may be necessary. Even with surgery, it may not always be possible to regain your normal voice.

The level of vocal ability varies. There has to be a high level of discipline (diet and lifestyle changes) to maintain an acceptable level of vocal function. If the vocal ability cannot match the functional needs of the patient, there may be a need to review the patient's vocal demands.

Caring for your voice

The majority of those with voice problems recover with voice therapy, appropriate medical treatment and surgery.

Our bodies are incredibly resilient, as are our vocal cords. In a normal male, the vocal cords vibrate 100-150 times per second. In females, they vibrate 200-250 times per second. Our vocal cords are thus under tremendous mechanical stress. While there are inbuilt mechanisms to help it recover, continuous voice abuse and misuse will cause a breakdown in the healing mechanism. 



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