

PATIENT INFORMATION

Our Voices – What Changes As We Get Older?

The physical changes of ageing eventually affect us all. Changes happen throughout the body, including the larynx – your ‘voice box’. The age at which deterioration becomes noticeable and the degree of change varies a lot from person to person. Some people are ‘old before their time’; while others appear to stay younger longer.

Ageing and the voice:

Our voices as well as our bodies also alter with time:

- The larynx drops over time, sitting lower in the neck. This makes the voice sound lower.
- The covering of your vocal folds thins and becomes drier.
- The glands that secrete mucus onto the vocal folds reduce in number. This can lead to sticky mucus that is more difficult to clear.
- The laryngeal cartilages gradually calcify, and the joints involved in opening and closing the vocal folds become stiffer.
- In women, hormonal changes make the vocal folds a little swollen and stiffer causing the pitch to drop and the quality to become rougher and breathier.
- In men, the vocal folds become thinner and stiffer causing the pitch to rise.
- Thinned vocal folds tend to lose their straight edge becoming curved often referred to as ‘bowing’.

This can lead to a voice that sounds weaker or more breathy and does not carry well in a noisy environment. You may find that your voice breaks or you struggle to stay on the same note.

Instability is common and speaking becomes effortful causing strain and discomfort. Vocal stamina is reduced.

- A tremor will make the voice sound shaky, tight and strained.

Most people find vocal changes occur gradually and never significantly affect their ability to communicate. However, in some they occur early and may be severe enough to make communication and social activities difficult.

There are lots of useful tips and advice for strengthening the voice on this sheet. If you still have concerns after trying these a Speech and Language Therapist may be able to give you further exercises to strengthen your voice.

You can refer yourself by contacting the Adult Speech and Language Therapy Department:

**Hengrave House, Torbay Hospital, Lowes Bridge,
Torquay, TQ2 7AA, 01803 654948 tsdft.voicetherapy@nhs.net**

Useful tips for maintaining a healthy voice:

Singing has been shown to be effective in keeping the voice working well and improving breathing and wellbeing. Consider taking lessons or joining a choir.

Make sure you exercise regularly – this helps keep you stronger, more flexible and improves your breathing and posture, which will also help your voice.

Make sure you eat a healthy and varied diet.

Keep well hydrated – 8 glasses of water a day is usually recommended.

If you smoke, ask your GP about smoking cessation programmes to help you give up. Smoking is irritating to your voice box and puts you at higher risk of cancer of the lungs, larynx and airway.

Keep alcohol to a minimum to reduce acid reflux and its detrimental effects on your brain and neurology.

Keep mentally active – crosswords and puzzles can help keep your vocabulary from shrinking. It helps to be able to find the right words.

Make sure your hearing has been checked and use your hearing aid if you have one.

What can I do to keep my voice in good health?

Use it or lose it! Keep using your voice every day. Don't stop socialising – make sure to see or telephone friends and relatives regularly.

Talk to people in shops or on the bus, talk to the dog or cat or even yourself. Do a regular vocal exercise; if you are by yourself, try reading aloud or humming a favourite tune.

For further assistance or to receive this information in a different format, please contact the department which created this leaflet.