

Voice

The human voice provides the basic sound for speech and singing. It expresses much of the meaning of what we want to say. Our voice tells other people a lot about our emotions, personality and physical and emotional health.

Children or adults may have a voice problem when they experience:

- A hoarse, husky, croaky, strained, strangled or shaky voice
- A voice that is too soft to be heard easily
- A voice that doesn't carry well over background noise or across large distances
- A voice that sounds higher or lower in pitch than the voices of other people of the same age and gender
- A voice that doesn't have its usual variation and flexibility in pitch and loudness
- A feeling of a tired voice after talking
- A feeling that it is an effort to use their voice
- A tight, scratchy, dry, uncomfortable or sore throat during and/or after talking
- A need to cough or clear the throat during and/or after talking

Any of these symptoms can happen when the vocal folds (vocal cords) in the larynx (voice box) are not working effectively. These symptoms may be seen along with an abnormality in the larynx (e.g. swelling, inflammation, bleeding, fungal infection or tumour, paralysis of the vocal folds, tremor (shaking) of the larynx and/or vocal folds, or spasm of the vocal folds). In many cases, there may not be any obvious problem and muscle tightness will be the only visible sign of the voice problem.

Why are voice problems important in people's lives?

Because of the power of the voice, anything that reduces our ability to use it can have a negative impact on our

everyday lives and the lives of our families, friends and employers. Even a very mild or occasional voice problem can interfere with a person's quality of life and ability to communicate.

Who can have a voice problem?

Anyone can develop a voice problem. Around 7% to 9% of children and 5% to 6% of adults will have a voice problem. Women are more likely to develop voice problems than men.

Certain groups of people are more likely to experience voice problems. Occupational voice users (e.g. teachers, child care workers, vocal performers, call centre workers, media presenters, auctioneers, barristers, aged care workers) are most at risk with around 18% having a voice problem at any one time, and up to 60% experiencing a voice problem at least once during their career.

Getting help

If you have any of the symptoms listed above for more than seven days, ask your doctor to refer you to a specialist voice clinic where you can see both a speech pathologist and Ear, Nose and Throat (ENT) specialist. If you don't have access to a voice clinic, you can ask your doctor to refer you to an ENT specialist who is experienced in diagnosing voice problems.

In some cases, the speech pathologist or ENT specialist will recommend that you see other health professionals (e.g. physiotherapist, gastroenterologist, respiratory physician, neurologist, psychologist, singing teacher or voice coach).



What can cause a voice problem?

While most voice problems are caused by a combination of factors, the most common cause is 'vocal load' i.e. talking or singing for extended periods without giving the voice rest breaks, talking or singing over noise or without proper amplification, talking or singing when you have a throat infection or in a way that harms your voice.

Emotional factors like anxiety, as well as other health and lifestyle factors, e.g. acid reflux, viral infections, and smoking, may also combine with a high vocal load to contribute to voice problems. Voice problems can also be caused by medical conditions such as stroke, head injury, Parkinson's disease, some types of cancer, thyroid problems and autoimmune conditions. Voice problems associated with the normal ageing process are also becoming more common e.g. hoarseness, weakness and shakiness of the voice in older people.

What can I do to protect myself from developing a voice problem?

Because many voice problems are preventable, there are things you can do to help protect and improve your voice:

Health and Lifestyle strategies

- Keep your body well-hydrated and avoid dehydrating drinks (e.g. alcohol, caffeine), drugs (e.g. tobacco, marijuana) and medications (e.g. antihistamines, cold and flu medications)
- Avoid foods that can lead to acid reflux into the larynx or increased thickness of mucous in the throat (e.g. chocolate, very spicy foods, foods with high acid content, full-cream dairy products, high-fat foods). Remember that different people respond differently to these foods and that they may not be a problem for you
- Avoid using recreational drugs that may dry and inflame your vocal folds; especially cocaine, tobacco and marijuana
- Avoid menthol-based throat lozenges or inhalations, as they dry the mucous lining of the throat and voicebox
- Avoid dry, dusty or polluted environments and try to breathe through your nose rather than your mouth
- See your doctor if any medications seem to affect your voice or throat
- Maintain a healthy lifestyle (i.e. have sufficient sleep, eat a balanced diet, maintain a healthy body weight, exercise regularly)
- Keep your stress levels manageable and try to express your feelings rather than bottling them up

Voice Use Strategies

- Take regular voice rest breaks, especially when your voice is tired or your throat feels uncomfortable, as well as on days when you need to use your voice extensively
- Warm-up your voice before using it for long periods of time and cool it down afterwards
- Avoid trying to compete with background noise when you talk or sing. Turn down noise, move away from it, use a voice amplifier and attract listeners' attention by clapping or signalling instead of with your voice.
- Avoid yelling, habitual throat clearing and singing outside of your comfortable range
- Try to talk and sing without straining your voice and throat and learn to project your voice from the front of your face rather than the throat
- Avoid whispering or using an unnaturally soft and breathy voice

For further information:

Contact Speech Pathology Australia – the national peak body representing speech pathologists, the professionals who work with and advocate for people who have a communication disability.

How do I become a speech pathologist?

Speech pathology is an accredited undergraduate or entry level masters degree.

To find out more go to www.speechpathologyaustralia.org.au/education-and-careers/university-courses

How do I find a speech pathologist in my area?

Go to www.speechpathologyaustralia.org.au and click on "Find a Speech Pathologist".

For further information contact **Speech Pathology Australia** – the national peak body representing speech pathologists, the professionals who work with and advocate for people who have a communication disability and all Australian consumers of speech pathology services.