

Patient information

Your voice following your stay in ICU

Your voice is unique to you and is an important part of your identity. Your friends and family recognise you, not just by the way you look, but also the way you talk, particularly when, for example, you speak on the telephone.

When changes in your voice occur and you no longer recognise it as your own, it can be alarming and sometimes distressing, especially when those close to you remark “you sound so different”!

The Speech and Language Therapy Department understands how important your voice is and how isolated you might feel without your natural voice. This leaflet is designed to explain why, following your stay in ICU, your voice may have altered, answer some frequently asked questions and hopefully give some helpful hints on how best to look after that unique asset which is your voice.

Why does my voice sound so quiet?

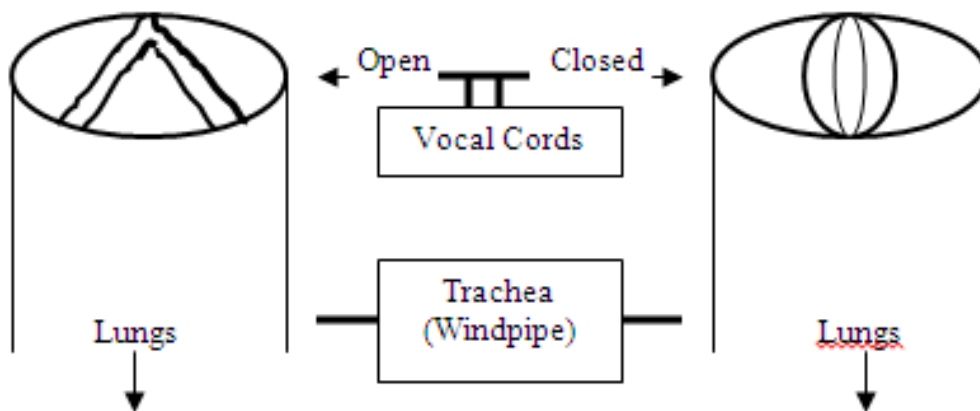
How loudly you speak depends directly on the airflow coming up from your lungs as it passes through the windpipe and into your vocal tract. During speech, the muscles that surround these structures control the amount of air and the speed at which it leaves the lungs. Regaining the muscular strength to expel the air can take time.

If you had a tracheostomy when you were on ICU, air will have entered and left your body through the ‘stoma’ or hole at the nape of your neck, rather than in the normal way. This means that the top of the windpipe and your vocal cords may not have felt air passing through them for some time. Feeling air pass through these structures after such a period, can be a strange sensation, and it is at this time, with the airflow, comes a renewed sense of taste and smell. Relearning how to adjust the amount and speed of airflow to create loudness of speech can take time. Often this will resolve on its own

accord but sometimes specific breathing exercises may be given to develop this by the department.

Why does my voice sound so 'breathy'?

When you speak, the vocal cords, situated at the top of the windpipe, are brought together by a number of muscles surrounding them. As air passes through them the vocal cords vibrate and it is this that makes the speech sound.



At some point during the course of your stay on ICU, the structure of the vocal cords, which are extremely delicate, may have changed slightly. Certain procedures, such as the need to make an artificial airway, may have led to swelling or abrasion on the vocal cords and can sometimes cause a degree of discomfort and soreness. If the vocal cords are unable to come together neatly, excessive air may escape between them as you make speak. It is this 'escape' that can sometimes be heard in a breathy voice.

If you had a tracheostomy when you were on ICU, your voice may also sound quite weak. Remember that the muscles around the vocal cords may not have been in use for a number of weeks and will take time to get back to full strength. Gentle exercising over a period of time can help to resolve this.

Tips for talking after tracheostomy

Take your time: remember that the stoma site needs time to heal. If you try to push too much air through your windpipe too soon, it could open up the stoma and the air will escape through this rather than up through the vocal cords.

Give yourself time to relax: remember all these structures (the lungs, windpipe and vocal cords) are surrounded by muscles. If you are tense, your voice will sound strained.

Know when to keep quiet: initially, talking after a tracheostomy can be very tiring. It's best to speak for short periods in your normal voice. Try not to force your speech through a whisper.

Drink up: fluids are essential in attaining and maintaining your vocal quality. Steam inhalation can also moisten the vocal cords.

Be reassured: remember that patients often report changes to the voice, so you are not alone. Many difficulties do resolve over time so try not to worry.

Finally, if you notice any persistent changes or are in any way concerned about your voice, please discuss this with your consultant or GP who can refer you to the Speech and Language Therapist.

If you would like any information regarding access to the West Suffolk Hospital and its facilities please visit the website for AccessAble (formerly DisabledGo)

<https://www.accessable.co.uk/organisations/west-suffolk-nhs-foundation-trust>



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