

Patient information

Practical voice care

Moisturising the vocal folds

The vocal folds are not narrow cords like rubber bands, but are like two little shelves of mucous membrane covered muscle that lie inside the larynx (voice box) in your neck. The covering of the two folds needs to be kept moist and flexible and is probably happiest in the steamy atmosphere of a shower.

There are two main ways to keep the lining of your throat and voice box moist:

1) Increase the amount of water that you drink

Many of us do not take in enough fluids during the day and can become dehydrated without knowing it. Tea and coffee both contain caffeine, which is a diuretic; this means that the body does not keep as much of the fluid as if we drink simple water. If we are well hydrated, the fluid tends to be more easily absorbed by the cells that need it, including the vocal folds. (American ENT doctors sometimes advise their patients to make sure they usually 'pee pale', and this is a good test to check your hydration levels).

Try to drink 6 - 8 glasses/mugs of water, squash or herbal tea each day, spacing this out over the day.

2) A period of regular steam inhaling can be very helpful

Steam inhaling can be useful both for the state of the vocal folds and for the general health of the mucous membranes that line the nasal and mouth cavities. If you can steam once or twice a day for 10-15 minutes, the water vapour goes into the cells of your vocal folds, somewhere that no lozenge, gargle, or linctus can ever reach. It acts as a general 'soother and moisturiser' and can also help to thin thick mucus. Steaming can be particularly helpful when a speaker has a tired, sore or hoarse voice, or has an irritating persistent cough or laryngitis, particularly if they have to sing or speak during that time. Sometimes it helps the

vocal folds recover when a voice problem continues even after a cold 'bug' disappears. It is useful as a 'night-time moisturiser' after you have been out in a noisy or smoky environment, or heavily used your voice, particularly if you have a cold or cough. Used before bed, it can soothe and help restore the moisture balance of the vocal folds.

Steam inhaling is beneficial because:

- It helps to 'plump up' the cells of strained vocal folds and increases their flexibility and healing.
- It puts moisture into the whole throat area. After a cold or cough the lining of the vocal tract can be quite dry which can add to vocal strain, or perpetuate a cough.
- Extra moisture encourages relaxation of any excess tension and can be soothing after heavy voice use.
- If extra moisture is put in, the cells of the mucous membranes do not have to produce so much lubrication, so the mucus produced by the cells just above the larynx may get less. If there is already thick phlegm, steam inhaling can help thin this sticky mucus.
- It can help release the very 'stuffed-up nose' feeling that happens with so many colds.
- If used after a steroid based asthma inhaler, steaming can help move any particles of inhalant away from the vocal folds and further down the airways.

How to steam inhale?

You can buy an inexpensive (less than £10) steam-inhaling mug from most large chemists. They can also be found through an internet search, enter the words 'steam inhaler'.

Using a mug enables you to watch TV or read as you inhale, which is much easier than the "head over a basin with towel" method, which can be hot, claustrophobic and boring.

Use ordinary water, just-boiled from the kettle. (Only if you have a cold or throat infection, try 2-3 drops of Olbas® oil or tea tree oil in each inhalation as a decongestant.)

Breathe normally, through the nose or mouth, for 10-15 minutes. Refill the mug with just boiled water 2-3 times as it will inevitably cool and lose the steam.

Some people choose to buy an **electrical steam inhaler**. These pump out a steady stream of temperature controlled water vapour and are particularly useful for performers eg an electric **Visiq Facial Steamer®** (approx. £14.99) which supplies both facial sauna and separate steaming container. It is obviously less portable than the plastic mug.

NB you will be handling just boiled very hot water; so be extremely careful and never tip the inhaler container

Moisturising the vocal folds makes sense when we realise just how hard they work when we talk.

The hard-and-fast working vocal folds

People vary as to how much they speak during a day eg work demands, social life and personality are just some of the influencing factors. But let's imagine someone might speak for around 5 hours (18,000 seconds) per day and look at some figures this amount of talking can generate:

If a **woman** has a middle range average spoken pitch, her vocal folds will be vibrating at a rate of around 220 times each second. That means her vocal folds will be opening and closing at least **4,140,000 times in one day**. Over a year that's 1511,100,000 vibrations!

For a **man** with a reasonably low average spoken pitch, the vocal folds may be vibrating at a rate of around 100 times each second. That means that his vocal folds will be opening and closing at least **1,800,000 times in a day**. That's 657,000,000 times in a year!

So the way in which we produce our voices, the tension settings of the muscles and the pressure we put on the vocal folds, will have a huge effect on the sound, the stamina and the general health of our voices. If we speak with too much throat constriction, a tightly pulled back tongue, a clenched jaw or thick, stiff vocal folds, it is likely that these patterns will have an effect on the way our throat feels and how our voice works and on the health of our vocal folds themselves. After a cold or cough the folds may be swollen and that often means we strain to produce voice; hydration steps are very important at such times.

Care of the voice muscles

Voice therapy, with a qualified speech and language therapist can help you to use your posture, breath and muscles in a more efficient and skilled way for better function.

There are approx 27 muscles in and around the voice box (the larynx), 15 of these are outside the larynx and hold it in position in the neck, 12 are essential, with a direct action on the vocal folds in their lengthening and shortening, tension and relaxation, thinning and thickening. These laryngeal muscles are intimately connected to the muscles of the neck, shoulders and upper chest and back. The tension of all these muscles is influenced by how we are feeling both physically and emotionally and they affect the function and sometimes the structure of the vocal folds. We need enough tension for a strong healthy voice, but not so much that the voice becomes strained and constricted.

Part of your voice therapy may involve work on posture, stretching, moving or general relaxation whilst standing, sitting in a chair or even lying on the floor to try to release inappropriate excess tension in muscles relevant to your voice. If we work practically on the tone of the big muscles, we usually help the small ones to rebalance, and to stop the aching caused by excess tightening. The working of the small ones can often get “out of sync” after we have had a bad throat infection, or “pushed” the voice, and this is one reason why a voice problem can continue for a long time after the ‘flu, a cold or cough. There will also be specific exercises for your throat.

Much voice work is bodywork and breath work, since a healthy pattern in both areas allows the vocal folds to work efficiently and without undue strain. Then the focus can move to more specific exercises including what we call ‘deconstricting’ or releasing the throat, plus increasing vocal fold flexibility and encouraging easy, well-projected spoken voice.

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



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