

Asthma and your voice

This leaflet explains how you can look after your voice if you have asthma.

What is asthma?

Asthma is a medical condition of the lungs that involves narrowing of the airways. This causes breathing difficulties.

Asthma occurs when something irritates the airways and causes them to tighten and become inflamed, making them narrower. Sticky mucus or phlegm are produced which narrow the airways further. This causes breathing difficulties and often triggers coughing.

Symptoms of asthma include:

- Coughing
- Tightness in the chest
- Shortness of breath
- Wheezing

People with severe asthma may frequently experience symptoms. Most people find they can control their symptoms with inhalers or other medication, so that they only become a problem occasionally.

Asthma is usually diagnosed in childhood. Adult diagnosis is usually following a viral infection.

Asthma and the voice

Asthma can sometimes affect the voice, because:

- 1) The medication being used to control it may cause side effects.
- 2) Our breathing patterns affect how the voice is produced and how it sounds.

1) Medication

If your inhalers are taken properly, the medication should be absorbed in the lungs and very little should be absorbed by the rest of the body. However, some people experience hoarseness of voice with certain types of inhaler use.

'Preventer inhalers' (usually brown in colour) have a small risk of the following side effects:

- Sore tongue
- Sore throat
- Hoarseness of voice
- A mouth infection called oral thrush

The following can help reduce these risks:

- Rinsing out your mouth and brushing your teeth after using your inhaler
- Using a spacer with your inhaler

2) Breathing pattern

Shortness of breath can lead to a strained voice quality. If breath support for speech is inadequate, the voice may be 'forced' from the voice box. Your speech and language therapist can suggest exercises to help reduce vocal strain.

Top tips if you have asthma:

- If available for your inhaler type, use a spacer
- Rinse your mouth out and brush your teeth after taking your medication.
- If your throat feels dry, keep hydrated by regularly sipping water. Some people find steam inhalation helpful.
- Attend asthma reviews at your GP practice, even if you feel your asthma is well controlled.
- Let your asthma nurse or GP know if you feel your asthma is not being controlled or that the medication may be affecting your voice. They may be able to suggest alternatives to your current treatments.
- Do not stop taking your asthma medication without discussing this with your GP or asthma nurse first.
- Do not smoke. For support stopping smoking: <https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/quit-smoking/nhs-stop-smoking-services-help-you-quit/>

Where to find out more:

Ask to see the asthma nurse at your local GP practice.

Contact Asthma UK, www.asthma.org.uk Details of their helpline are on the website.

Contact us

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To find out more about our Trust visit www.royalberkshire.nhs.uk

Please ask if you need this information in another language or format.

Caroline Parry, Highly Specialist Speech & Language Therapist, July 2023

Next review due: July 2025