

Voice change after COVID-19

This leaflet provides information and advice for those experiencing a change in voice quality following a confirmed COVID-19 diagnosis.

Changes to your voice

You may experience some temporary changes to the sound of your voice following COVID-19. This is because your vocal cords may have become swollen and inflamed due to prolonged coughing. This causes them to vibrate less easily. Your breathing may also have been affected by the virus and you may have been feeling tired. This can lead to vocal strain from a less supportive breath pattern being used. Your voice should start to recover, as you start to feel stronger, your breathing improves and the inflammation of your upper airway reduces. This could take 6-8 weeks, but you should start to see an improvement after two weeks.

How COVID-19 may affect your voice:

- Sounds deeper than usual.
- Has a “rough” quality to it.
- Is a whisper.
- Feels hard to produce and tires you quickly.
- Feels sore to talk.

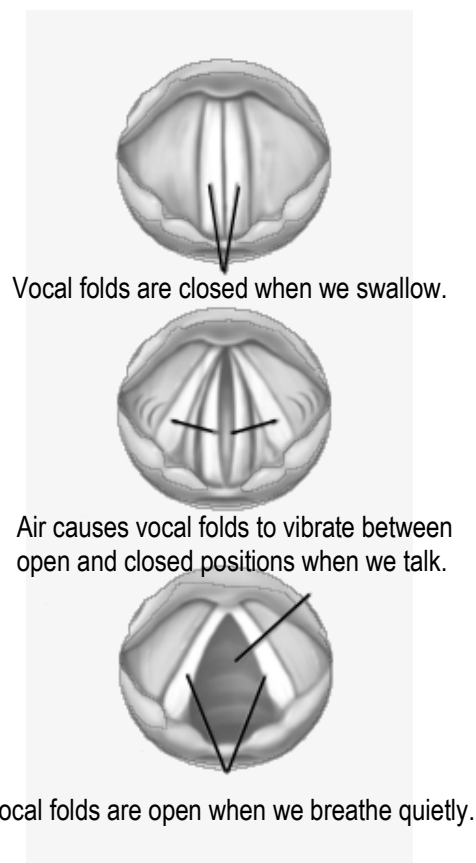
This may have an impact on how you communicate with those around you. Some people find a change in voice an inconvenience, and for some people it can be very distressing. However, there are things you can do to help your voice recover as quickly as possible:

How does the voice work?

Your voice comes from the vibration of the vocal folds, sometimes known as “vocal cords”. As you breathe out, air from your lungs passes up the trachea (windpipe) and into the larynx (voice box) where the vocal folds are found. The vocal folds can be positioned together or apart.

When they are held apart, air passes freely through them silently. This happens when you are sitting quietly, but also when sighing or making certain speech sounds, such as “sssss”.

The vocal folds are moved together when you cough or swallow. They can also be brought together to make voice sounds. When this occurs, air from your lungs passes between the closed vocal folds. This causes them to vibrate and the vibration is the sound that we call our voice.



As breath passes through the larynx, the voice resonates (gets made louder) through the nose and mouth where it is modified by the tongue, teeth and lips to make speech sounds.

How to help your voice recover:

Hydrate

- Aim to drink 1.5-2 litres (4-5 pints) of fluid each day (unless advised against by your doctor). Water is best. Squash and other drinks can count towards this, but try to avoid fizzy drinks and caffeinated options. Ask your speech and language therapist if you require further advice on this.
- Try steam inhalation using hot water. You do not need to add anything to the water. Stop if it brings on coughing.
- Lubricate the throat by chewing sugar free gum or sucking sweets, which can increase saliva flow. Avoid medicated throat sweets, unless advised otherwise by your doctor.

Avoid coughing

- When you are unwell with the virus, you may not be able to avoid coughing. Coughing helps clear mucus from your lungs and throat. However, it also brings the vocal cords together with force and this leads to inflammation. Once the peak of your symptoms have passed, try to avoid coughing.
- If you need to cough, do so gently. Try sipping water and swallowing hard instead. Avoid persistently clearing your throat and ensure this is not becoming a habit.
- Try to speak in your usual way, even if the voice sounds different. Deliberately altering the way you talk can cause strain. Therefore, avoid forcing the voice to make it louder. Equally, avoid deliberately whispering
- Reduce background noise to ensure you are heard and ensure you have the listener's attention before talking.
- If you are talking via an online video, try to speak as if the person you are talking to is in the room with you. Avoid straining "through the screen" and ensure you are sitting comfortably in an upright position that allows you to breathe and talk gently and easily. Avoid hunching or raising your shoulders.

Should I stop talking?

- If your voice has reduced to a whisper or feels sore, then rest it. Avoid unnecessary conversations and keep conversations short.
- Consider using text-based communication or emails, rather than telephone and video calls.
- Try to avoid completely resting the voice. Avoid being completely silent. When the virus is at its peak, still try to use your voice a little throughout the day, if you can. If you live alone, try a little gentle humming if you have not used your voice in conversation.
- Avoid singing, shouting and other activities that involve projecting the voice, such as giving presentations / lectures. You can gradually return to these as the voice recovers.

General voice care:

- Avoid smoking
- Avoid drinking caffeinated drinks and alcohol
- Ensure any underlying acid reflux is well managed.
- Avoid dusty or smoky atmospheres.
- Regulate your breathing when you speak, ensuring to stop for frequent breaths.
- Be aware of physical tension. Prolonged excessive muscle tension, particularly in your shoulders, neck and face, may contribute to a strained voice.
- Manage your emotional well-being. Our personal well-being can impact on voice quality. Reach out and ask for help from family and friends, GP or other health professionals if you are feeling anxious, low in mood or isolated.

When and where to get further help and advice

Please contact your GP if you have concerns about a new change in your voice quality. We would recommend informing your GP or doctor if there is no improvement in your voice after two weeks of feeling otherwise recovered from a virus, or if your voice is improving but has not returned to normal within 6-8 weeks. In these cases, you may benefit from a referral to the Ear, Nose and Throat (ENT) Team. An ENT expert can assess the overall function of your voice box. If required, they can also refer you to a specialist speech and language therapist for further advice.

Contact us

Adult Speech & Language Therapy
Inpatient Therapies, Level 1 Battle Block
Royal Berkshire Hospital
London Road, Reading RG1 5AN
Tel: 0118 322 5205 or Email: rbft.speechlanguage@nhs.net

If you have any concerns about your care and would rather speak to someone outside of the department, then please contact PALS. Tel: 0118 322 8338 Email: PALS@royalberkshire.nhs.uk

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

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

Author: Caroline Parry, Highly Specialist Speech and Language Therapist, July 2023
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