

About Your Voice

WHAT IS VOICE?

Voice is the sound made by vibration of the vocal cords caused by air passing out through the larynx bringing the cords closer together. Your voice is an extremely valuable resource and is the most commonly used form of communication. Our voice is invaluable for both our social interaction as well as for most people's occupation. Proper care and use of your voice improves the likelihood of having a healthy voice for your entire lifetime.

HOW DO I KNOW IF I HAVE A VOICE PROBLEM?

Voice problems occur with a change in the voice, often described as hoarseness, roughness, or a raspy quality. People with voice problems often complain about or notice changes in pitch, loss of voice, loss of endurance, and sometimes a sharp or dull pain associated with voice use. Other voice problems may accompany a change in singing ability that is most notable in the upper singing range. A more serious problem is indicated by spitting up blood or when blood is present in the mucus. These require prompt attention by an otolaryngologist.

WHAT IS THE MOST COMMON CAUSE OF A CHANGE IN YOUR VOICE?

Voice changes sometimes follow an upper respiratory infection lasting up to two weeks. Typically, the upper respiratory infection or cold causes swelling of the vocal cords and changes their vibration resulting in an abnormal voice. Reduced voice use (voice rest) typically improves the voice after an upper respiratory infection, cold, or bronchitis. If voice does not return to its normal characteristics and capabilities within two to four weeks after a cold, a medical evaluation by an ear, nose, and throat specialist is recommended. A throat examination after a change in the voice lasting longer than one month is especially important for smokers. (Note: A change in voice is one of the first and most important symptoms of throat cancer. Early detection significantly increases the effectiveness of treatment.)

SIX TIPS TO IDENTIFY VOICE PROBLEMS

Ask yourself the following questions to determine if you have an unhealthy voice:

- Has your voice become hoarse or raspy?
- Does your throat often feel raw, achy, or strained?
- Does talking require more effort?
- Do you find yourself repeatedly clearing your throat?
- Do people regularly ask you if you have a cold when in fact you do not?
- Have you lost your ability to hit some high notes when singing?