

How will Head & Neck Radiotherapy and Chemotherapy affect my voice?

**Speech & Language Therapy
Community & Therapy Services**

This leaflet has been designed to give you important information about your procedure, and to answer some common queries that you may have.



Information for patients and visitors

Introduction

This leaflet has been produced to give you general information about how chemo-radiotherapy / radiotherapy to the head and neck may affect your voice. Most of your questions should be answered by this leaflet.

It is not intended to replace the discussion between you and your Speech and Language Therapist, but may act as a starting point for discussion. If after reading it you have any concerns or require further explanation, please discuss this with your Speech and Language Therapist.

How can head and neck radiotherapy affect my voice?

Radiotherapy can result in a dry, sore and swollen throat. This may cause your throat to feel uncomfortable when talking. Your voice may also become hoarse or you may lose your voice completely whilst having your treatment.

How can I look after my voice? What to do and why

Give up smoking

Smoking causes the throat and vocal cords to become inflamed and swollen from the dryness, heat and tar from the tobacco smoke. Smoking (including passive smoking) may therefore worsen any side-effects from your radiotherapy treatment.

There are many benefits to giving up smoking. If you would like any advice or help on giving up smoking you can access the local Smoking Cessation Service by going to www.freedomfromsmoke.co.uk, or by ringing 0845 603 2166.

Drink Plenty of Fluids

To keep your vocal cords healthy, your body needs enough fluid. General opinion is that 8 glasses (2 litres) a day is about right. During your treatment you may find that you need to drink more. The best fluids for the body are water, squash, herbal teas and juices.

Avoid Caffeine

Fluids such as tea, coffee, and fizzy drinks contain caffeine which dehydrates your body. Caffeine also has a drying effect on the vocal cords.

Avoid Alcohol

Alcohol causes the vocal cords to become dry and inflamed. It is not advisable to drink alcohol whilst you are having your radiotherapy treatment. This may worsen your symptoms.

Foods

Research shows that indigestion / acid reflux can cause voice problems. Some people find that certain foods and drinks can give them symptoms of acid reflux i.e. coffee and spicy foods. For more information on acid reflux and managing symptoms, please ask your Speech and Language Therapist.

Throat Clearing / Coughing

When you cough or clear your throat your vocal cords come together with force. If this happens repeatedly you can cause them to become sore, causing voice changes and producing more mucus.

This can also cause voice changes. This may have developed into a habit. Instead of coughing or clearing your throat, drink water, swallow hard, yawn, or suck a sugar free



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sweet instead. This will help you to break the habit.

Shouting / Raising Voice / Voice Rest

When shouting or raising your voice your vocal cords come together with force and you increase the muscular tension in your neck.

Constant shouting and raising your voice can cause vocal strain (making it work much harder and requiring much more effort).

This in turn may increase the likelihood of developing changes to your vocal cords and as a result affecting the sound of your voice.

Whispering

Often people feel that whispering can help by giving the voice a rest, however, whilst you are not using your voice it can still cause damage to your voice box.

Most people use more pressure, and strain the muscles more when they are whispering than when they are talking. Try to speak in a soft voice instead to reduce effort.

Relaxation

Attending the hospital for daily radiotherapy treatment can be very tiring. You may also feel anxious about attending for treatment. Any tension in the body can be transmitted to the voice.

This means that the ability to relax is very important for your voice and for your general well being. True relaxation involves the mind and body and can be taught. Please ask your Speech and Language Therapist.

Posture

Any imbalance in posture can cause muscle tension in the body. The best posture for voice is an open relaxed posture e.g. uncrossed legs and arms, and a centrally aligned body.

If you spend a lot of time talking with your neck twisted, or tilted you will be using your muscles unevenly e.g. when using the telephone, or talking to someone over your shoulder.

Especially consider your volume and the posture of your head/neck while on the telephone.

Chemicals / Sprays

Avoid air fresheners, plug-ins, and aerosols (e.g. spray deodorant, perfumes, hairsprays). These release chemicals into the air which are inhaled when you breathe.

This can irritate the lining of your throat and vocal cords. If you decide to continue to use aerosols, do so in a well-ventilated room.

Dry Air (Central Heating / Air Conditioning)

Breathing in dry or dusty air can dry out the mucous linings of your throat and vocal cords. Centrally heated or air-conditioned environments can cause the air you breathe to become dry. If you spend large amounts of time in these environments increase your fluid intake to ensure your body is fully hydrated.

In a centrally heated environment, try placing water near a heat source e.g., under or near a radiator, as this will add moisture to the air.

If your throat feels dry, you could try inhaling steam. **Do not put any scents, especially not menthol / Olbas oil in to the water, as**



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these products are designed to dry out the mucous linings in the body.

Background Noise

We tend to talk louder if our surroundings are noisy e.g., home, work, in the car, pubs / clubs, sports events etc. Often we are not aware of raising our voices even slightly e.g., in response to continuous sounds such as air conditioning.

Avoid speaking for long periods in noisy environments and wherever possible remove or reduce unnecessary noise e.g., turning the television off or down whilst speaking.

Acknowledgements

This leaflet has been distributed by Speech and Language Therapy Department at Northern Lincolnshire and Goole NHS Foundation Trust.

The content was written by the speech and language therapy team at Hull and East Yorkshire Hospitals NHS Trust.

Concerns and Queries

If you have any concerns / queries about any of the services offered by the Trust, in the first instance, please speak to the person providing your care.

For Diana, Princess of Wales Hospital

Alternatively you can contact the Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) on (01472) 875403 or at the PALS office which is situated near the main entrance.

For Scunthorpe General Hospital

Alternatively you can contact the Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) on (01724) 290132 or at the PALS office which is situated on C Floor.

Alternatively you can email:

nlg-tr.PALS@nhs.net

Confidentiality

Information on NHS patients is collected in a variety of ways and for a variety of reasons (e.g. providing care and treatment, managing and planning the NHS, training and educating staff, research etc.).

Everyone working for the NHS has a legal duty to keep information about you confidential. Information will only ever be shared with people who have a genuine need for it (e.g. your GP or other professionals from whom you have been receiving care) or if the law requires it, for example, to notify a birth.

Please be assured however that anyone who receives information from us is also under a legal duty to keep it confidential.

Zero Tolerance - Violent, Threatening and Abusive Behaviour

The Trust and its staff are committed to providing high quality care to patients within the department. However, we wish to advise all patients / visitors that the following inappropriate behaviour will not be tolerated:

- Swearing
- Threatening / abusive behaviour
- Verbal / physical abuse

The Trust reserves the right to withdraw from treating patients whom are threatening / abusive / violent and ensuring the removal of those persons from the premises.

All acts of criminal violence and aggression will be notified to the Police immediately.



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Risk Management Strategy

The Trust welcomes comments and suggestions from patients and visitors that could help to reduce risk.

Perhaps you have experienced something whilst in hospital, whilst attending as an outpatient or as a visitor and you felt at risk.

Please tell a member of staff on the ward or in the department you are attending / visiting.

Moving & Handling

The Trust operates a Minimal Lifting Policy, which in essence means patients are only ever lifted by nursing staff in an emergency situation.

Patients are always encouraged to help themselves as much as possible when mobilising, and if unable to do so, equipment may be used to assist in their safe transfer.

If you have any questions regarding moving and handling of patients within the Trust, please speak to a member of staff in the ward or department you are visiting.

Northern Lincolnshire and Goole NHS Foundation Trust

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Date of issue: April, 2016

Review Period: April, 2019

Author: Macmillan Speech and Language Therapist

IFP-549

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