

Voice and Communication Therapy for Trans and Non-binary People – Where to start

Information for patients

This leaflet contains content about:

- 1) Healthy voice care advice
- 2) Starting voice exploration

Before attending voice and communication sessions, consider if you are looking after the health of your voice. It is also possible to start gently exploring what you do with your voice in your own time. This leaflet has some suggestions to consider.

Remember voice exploration and change can be a very personal process and may be different from person to person. Only follow suggestions that feel right for you.

Step One – Voice Care – Tips for healthy voice

Voice Care Tip 1 - Reduce irritants, such as smoke and dust

1a) **Smoking and vaping** – Do your best to stop smoking or vaping. If you can't stop completely, reduce as much as possible. Inhaling irritants can dry and irritate the vocal tract and compromise lung function, which is important for voice. Smoking can cause the vocal cords to become inflamed, affecting the quality of the sound and the flexibility of your voice.

If you are smoking, you can ask your clinician to refer you to a smoking cessation service or you can get in touch directly online: <https://services.nhslothian.scot/quit-your-way/>

1b) **Other irritants** – Be aware of things that irritate or dry out your throat, e.g. chemicals, air fresheners, menthol, spicy food, caffeine, alcohol, or smoky/dusty/dry environments.

If using inhalers, ensure you use a spacer device if provided and rinse your mouth after use. [NHS-Lothian-Inhaler-Training-Guide-Dec-2023.pdf](#)

1c) **Acid reflux** – If you experience stomach contents coming up to your throat regularly, follow lifestyle/dietary advice to reduce 'laryngopharyngeal reflux'. If it continues, ask your pharmacist or GP for advice.



Voice Care Tip 2 - Good hydration

2a) **Fluid intake** – To keep your vocal cords hydrated, sip non-caffeinated fluids throughout each day. Take a water bottle with you when you go out.

2b) **Steam inhalation** – If your throat is dry, you can breathe in steam through your mouth to add moisture to your vocal cords. Note: Allow boiling water to cool a little so it does not burn you, and do not add anything to the water.

2c) **Atmosphere** – Keep the atmosphere humidified if possible. If the air in your room is dry, you could put out bowls of water or hang up a damp towel.

Voice Care Tip 3 - Avoid vocal abuse

3a) **Comfort** – Avoid any style of speaking which feels too effortful, causes pain or physical discomfort, or causes the voice to get tired very quickly. This includes forcing your pitch uncomfortably high or low; you can learn other ways to change your voice more comfortably.

3b) **Shouting** – Avoid excessive shouting. If needed, encourage others to come towards you rather than shouting over distance. Turn down or move away from very loud background noise where possible.

3c) **Coughing** – Avoid frequent throat clearing or dry coughs. Try to take a sip of water, swallow your saliva, or clear your throat gently instead.

3d) **Amplification** – If you present/teach/preach to large groups, request and use a microphone.

Voice Care Tip 4 - Vocal foundations: breath, posture, relaxation

4a) **Breath support** – Use slow, relaxed breaths rather than fast, shallow ones. Allow your belly to expand when you breathe in. Pause for a new breath before you run short; don't keep talking when you're running out of breath.

4b) **Posture** – A hunched posture can reduce breath support and projection. Increase your awareness of your posture. Notice whether an open, upright posture helps your breathing or your voice.

4c) **Muscle Tension** – Overly tense muscles prevent healthy, efficient voice use. Avoid any style of speaking which causes tension or tightness in your throat. Increase your awareness of any muscle tension and complete some *gentle* movements or stretches to release tension in your shoulders, neck, jaw and throat if needed.

4d) **Stress** – Sometimes our general health and emotions have an impact on tension and voice. It is helpful to acknowledge factors which cause this, e.g. stress or anxiety, and to seek support with working through any difficulties that are affecting you.

Example Throat Relaxation Exercise:

- Open your mouth as if to bite a large apple
- Breathe out, as if to mist up a mirror, but be silent (don't make any sound)
- Notice a stretch or sense of openness in your throat
- Notice warm, moist air (if you breathe on your palm, it should feel hot)
- Tip: See if you can further open the space in your throat with a 'surprised' face.

Voice Care Tip 5 - Warm up your voice

5a) **Vocal warm up** – Complete vocal warm up exercises for 1-2 minutes near the start of your day and/or before any instances of using your voice a lot.

5b) **Use your voice** – Use your voice regularly throughout the day. If you haven't spoken for an hour, speak to someone, complete some warmup exercises, or hum, gently sing, talk, or read to yourself.

Example Vocal Warm Up Exercises:

On one or more of the sounds below:

- a) Make the sound on one consistent, comfortable pitch
- b) Make the sound whilst slowly going up and down in pitch (like a siren)

- Hums - “mmmmm”
- Lip trills - “brrrrr” (like a landline phone ringing)
- Ng sounds - “ng” (like at the end of the word ‘sing’)
- Z or V sounds - “zzz” or “vvv”

Tips:

- Before you start, ensure your throat is hydrated; relax any excess tension; check your posture is upright and relaxed; and take a slow, relaxed breath.
- Pause for new breaths well before you run out of breath.
- Aim for a clear sound (not too soft or breathy).
- Aim for a relaxed, efficient sound. Stop if there is any physical discomfort such as a feeling of strain or force.

Step Two – Tips for starting voice exploration

Voice Exploration Tip 1 - Start a voice journal

Get a notebook (or a file on your computer or phone) where you can write down thoughts, reflections, information or questions about voice. Perhaps make some notes, or a plan, based on voice exploration tips 2-6.

Voice Exploration Tip 2 - Pay attention to voices

Every now and then, take some time to listen to some people’s voices. You can listen to people you know, people on tv or radio, or look up clips of people whose voices you like.

Notice the variety between voices. Think about what words you would use to describe the voices. Notice the similarities and differences between two voices and notice how one person’s voice can change in different scenarios. For example, do you know anyone who has a ‘customer service voice’, a ‘telephone voice’ or a ‘talking to animals voice’? See if you can identify which voices you like best, and why.

Voice Exploration Tip 3 - Experiment with your voice

As long as you don’t do anything which hurts your voice or feels physically uncomfortable or effortful, feel free to gently play around with your voice and explore what your voice can already do.

Do more of any voice activities you enjoy such as singing, acting, comedy, mimicking, silly voices, or character voices (e.g. for role-playing games). Remember to warm up your voice first and avoid any sense of physical discomfort, effortfulness or strain.

Voice Exploration Tip 4 - Think about your goals

Before your first voice and communication therapy (VCT) appointment, it can be useful to consider how you will know if VCT has been successful. Think about what you want to be different and how this could be measured. Consider whether you know what steps might be involved in achieving this change. Remember: voice goals should be based on what is important for you personally; nobody else should be deciding your goals or telling you how to measure success.

Voice Exploration Tip 5 - Think about practicing

Before your first voice and communication therapy (VCT) appointment, think about when and where you can practice your new voice and how you will make time for, or remember, your voice

practice. Think about any people you can talk to about your voice goals, or who might be able to help you practice.

Voice Exploration Tip 6 - Learn how the voice works and some voice terminology

Voice Production:

- 1) The breath (as we breathe out) provides the *power* for the voice.
- 2) The vocal cords move together and apart very quickly. This is vibration and causes the air being breathed out to vibrate. This is the sound *source*.

The movement of the vocal cords affects pitch and voice quality.

- 3) The vibrating air travels through the vocal tract (the space above your vocal cords in your throat and mouth). This is the sound *filter*.

The size and shape of the space for air in the vocal tract affects resonance.

Voice Characteristics:

Voices have different characteristics which can be changed independently of each other:

Pitch

- We can describe voices as sounding '*higher*' in pitch or '*lower*' in pitch.
- The speed of vocal cord vibration produces the pitch. Faster vibrations produce a higher pitch, and slower vibrations produce a lower pitch.
- To explore pitch, you can glide/siren up and down and/or sing or hum consecutive notes. Perhaps explore what musical note you can hum up or down to. Never go further than is comfortable.

Resonance

- We can describe voices as sounding '*brighter*' in resonance or '*darker*' in resonance.
- The shape and size of the space in the vocal tract determines resonance. A larger space produces a darker sounding resonance, and a narrower space produces a brighter sounding resonance.
- To explore resonance, you can hum on a consistent pitch and then change the space in your mouth (e.g. using a chewing motion or adding and removing a smile or yawn). Stay relaxed; avoid any technique which causes tightness or tension in your throat or voice.

Voice Quality

- We can describe voices as sounding '*thinner*' in quality, '*thicker*' in quality, or '*breathier*' in quality. Voice quality is also referred to as vocal weight.
- Voice quality is affected by how much vocal cord tissue comes together when the vocal folds vibrate. A thicker amount of vocal cord contact sounds thicker/heavier. A thinner amount of vocal cord contact sounds thinner/lighter.
- Our voice quality gets thinner when use our higher pitch range and thicker when we use our lower pitch range. However, we can learn to change pitch and voice quality independently of each other. Because high voices are often thinner, people may associate a thin voice quality with sounding "higher" or think a thick voice sounds "lower" even if the pitch has not changed.

- Breathy voice occurs if there is a gap between the vocal cords when speaking. A very breathy voice quality is inefficient. It can sound soft, it is difficult to project loudly, and it can cause the vocal cords to dry out more quickly.

Emphasis

- Emphasis is placed on key words or syllables to add or clarify meaning.
- Pitch change, volume change, vowel length, and pacing can all be used to add emphasis.
- Using higher or more frequent pitch increases for emphasis can be a feminine gender cue. A less feminine way to add emphasis is to use volume change and pacing to add stress to key words, while using less pitch increase. However, note that emphasis and expression are individual and can vary from person to person.

Other characteristics

Other differences you may notice in people's speech and can explore in your own voice include:

- Speech rate – How fast or slow you speak
- Speech clarity – Whether you mumble or articulate clearly
- Volume – How loudly or quietly you speak
- Twang – A brassy sound (like in country singing). Useful for being heard
- Accent – Pronunciation. Related to geographical areas or social groups.

Do not worry about understanding or memorising all this information. Allow yourself to be curious about how voices can be different. It is completely okay for you to make up your own words to describe voices.