

Voice and Voice Disorders

The human voice is an integral component to speech. With it, we can convey emotion, use it as a tool to shape our identity and convey and deliver messages.

Why is our voice important?

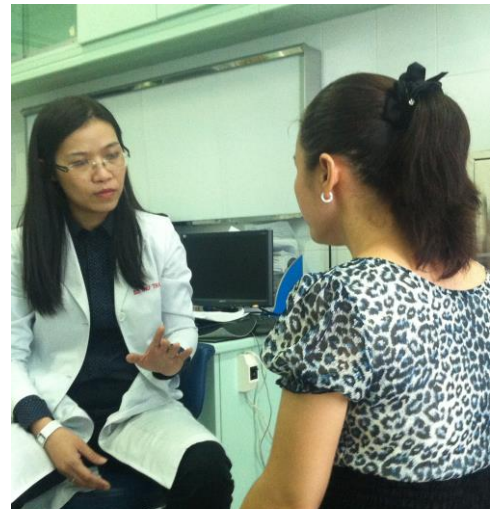
Our voice has an important role in helping us communicate. When it is not working properly it can affect personal life, work life, and even symptoms that seem mild can affect our ability to communicate.

People who have voice problems may report symptoms of:

- Pain or soreness
- Huskiness
- Straining
- Rough
- “Wobbly” voice or voice tremor
- Losing their voice
- Excessive throat clearing
- Frequent coughing
- Vocal fatigue
- Breathy or soft voice

As a result, people may find that:

- Their voice may suddenly shift up or down in pitch making their voice sound higher or lower than is normal for other speakers.
- They may have difficulty being heard, particularly when talking over background noise or over a distance.
- Their voice becomes tired, dry or uncomfortable after talking and can be accompanied with the persistent need to clear the throat.



These symptoms can result when the vocal folds, within the larynx (voice box), are subject to vocally traumatic behaviours, or when there is an abnormality (e.g. swelling, growths, lesions, nodules, tension, bleeding, infection, paralysis and tremor or spasm of the vocal cords) present in the larynx.

So what can cause voice disorders?

The main contributors to voice disorders include:

- ‘Vocal load’ (talking or singing for long periods of time without resting your voice, straining to be heard over background noise).
- Allergies, cold or other respiratory infections.
- Reflux/heartburn
- The use of recreational drugs, smoking or alcohol consumption.
- Additionally, voice can be affected by our emotional state (anxiety) and other health conditions such a stroke or other neurological conditions (e.g. Parkinson’s Disease), head/brain injury, cancer, thyroid, autoimmune diseases or as a natural result of the ageing process.



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Who may experience a voice problem?

In the U.S.A. approximately 2.4% of the population have difficulty using their voices (that's 7.5 million people!).

It is possible for anyone to develop voice disorders. Occupations that rely heavily on voice use include professional actors, singers, coaches, ministers, sales representatives and teachers.

Who can help?

If you are experiencing these symptoms and they appear to be affecting your everyday communication there are many people who can help.

A doctor or nurse can refer you to a specialist such as an Ear Nose & Throat Specialist, an otolaryngologist, psychologist, gastroenterologist or a speech therapist.

How can Speech Therapists help?

- A speech therapist can assess your voice and provide therapy options that may help improve your voice as well as provide strategies and techniques to prevent further voice problems.

How can you avoid a voice disorder?

Some general strategies to help maintain a healthy voice include:

- Drink plenty of water and avoid things that may dry out your throat (e.g. caffeine, lozenges containing menthol, alcohol)
- Avoid yelling, or talking loudly without proper training

- Avoid foods that might trigger reflux if you have it. Avoid substances that can inflame your throat (e.g. tobacco and recreational drugs).
- Avoid dry or dusty environments that may irritate your throat and cause you to cough, or you are in these environments, wearing a face mask to help protect your voice.
- Eat a healthy and well balanced diet
- Be aware of stress or anxiety you may be experiencing and try to manage them appropriately.
- Be sure to rest your voice when it is feeling tired and when you are sick.
- Avoid competing with background noise whilst talking.
- Avoid unnecessary whispering, talking breathily, or straining when talking.
- Avoid breathing through your mouth as this can dry out your vocal folds.

For more information on speech pathology, visit the Trinh Foundation Website:

<http://trinhfoundation.org>

Contact details for Vietnamese trained speech therapist are provided on the Trinh Foundation Australia website.