

of their products. Often it is the action of swallowing that is helpful as it increases saliva production and keeps the throat muscles moving.

- **Hot drinks such as lemon and honey do no harm, are soothing and help prevent dehydration.**
- Gargling with soluble aspirin is often recommended to treat sore throats. While effective at reducing pain, aspirin affects blood vessels making them fragile and likely to bleed. Clotting is also slowed so any bleed continues for longer than usual. **Singers should avoid taking aspirin during an URTI unless it has been prescribed for other reasons.**
- **Gargling with salt water or over-the-counter medications can lubricate and help reduce throat pain.** Salt water has the added benefit that it is free of side effects. If using medications it is best to consult your GP or a pharmacist to find a suitable brand.
- **Paracetamol taken systemically is effective at reducing throat pain and the general malaise such as headache, aching and fever.**
- **Cough suppressants should be avoided.** Infected mucus needs to be cleared from the chest. Brisk expulsion of air from the lungs will carry mucus upwards so that it is easier to clear with a gentle cough.

## HOARSENESS (LARYNGITIS)

Sometimes the voice is apparently unaffected or only mildly affected by an URTI. However, inflammation in the nose and throat is frequently present in the larynx and vocal folds (cords), even if the patient is unaware of any significant voice change. *Symptoms to watch out for are:*

- **Your speaking voice is lower in pitch.**
- **Reduction in your singing voice range.**
- **Slow voice onset on some notes.**
- **Voice breaks in the upper singing range.**
- **A breathy vocal quality.**
- **Increased vocal effort when singing or speaking.**

## MY VOICE IS HOARSE - WHAT CAN I DO?

- **If you are a professional voice user, ideally cancel any immediate engagements and begin complete voice rest.** Laryngitis makes singers more prone to injury so don't risk it! Write notes for necessary communication and let your voicemail take the strain.
- **Avoid smoking, atmospheric irritants and alcohol.**
- **Try not to cough** – sip water or suck a throat pastille to reduce irritation.
- **Inhale steam.** This reduces inflammation and thins down thick mucus. Ten minutes three or four times a day with a bowl of hot steamy water and a towel over the head will do it. Steamy baths and showers also help.
- **Sleep as much as possible and eat healthily – plenty of fruit and vegetables.**
- **Treat any acid reflux with antacids** and seek medical advice from your GP if this does not control it. Acid on already inflamed vocal folds is not a good idea!
- **Once the voice is recovering resume short periods of talking and maintain plenty of vocal rest.** If you are a singer, short periods of gentle semi-occluded vocal tract exercises (e.g. vocalising through a straw into water) can be helpful. Stop if your voice feels effortful or tired.
- **Should your voice fail to return to normal within three weeks ask your GP for a referral to an ENT surgeon/laryngologist** so your larynx can be examined and appropriate medical care provided.
- **If you have a persistent dry cough consult your GP** as dry coughs are not usually associated with URTIs.

Upper respiratory tract infections are an unavoidable nuisance. However, the advice above should help reduce the symptoms. If you use your voice a lot at work take a day or so off. It is better to take a short time off than risk a vocal injury that will take a longer time to heal.

This information is also available online in the Voice Care section of our website

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# COPING WITH COLDS

## A guide to voice care during upper respiratory tract infections



## WHAT CAUSES A COLD?

The ‘common cold’ is anything but common. It covers a wide range of viruses that cause similar symptoms.

These include a blocked nose, sneezing, catarrh, sore throat, headache, hoarseness and general feeling of being unwell. Doctors refer to these infections as ‘upper respiratory tract infections’ (URTIs). **Unfortunately, because most URTIs are viral, antibiotics are generally ineffective against them.**

**URTIs can affect the whole airway or any part of it.** When they affect the voice box (larynx) the voice will become deeper, rough in quality and in severe cases may deteriorate almost to a whisper. **A cough will develop if the lungs are affected** (bronchitis).

## HOW LONG DO URTIs USUALLY LAST?

Most URTIs take a day or so to develop (the prodromal period), are at their **worst for two to three days then begin to recover.**

Although **people usually recover within a week or so**, damage to the mucus transport system may delay recovery from the cough and thick catarrh for up to six weeks (*you can find out more about how the cilia that transport the mucus blanket are damaged by URTIs in the extended version of this information on our website*). **Laryngitis is usually acute over two to three days.** However it may take up to 10-14 days before the voice is completely normal.

**For professional voice users, particularly teachers, singers and actors, URTIs can be difficult to manage.** If the voice is hoarse or unreliable, work may be significantly affected or simply impossible. Lost working days can be disruptive and worrying, particularly if they affect earnings.

*So, what can we do?*

## PREVENTION

**We can’t prevent URTIs unfortunately, but we can do things to reduce our chances of catching them.**



- **Wash your hands** after travelling and particularly before eating/drinking.
- If washing facilities are limited **carry antibacterial wipes** to use on your hands before eating/drinking.
- **Use antibacterial** wipes to clean the telephone/commonly used surfaces if someone you live with has an URTI.
- **Don’t share** cups/glasses or cutlery/toothbrushes/food or towels.
- **Avoid touching your face** (especially your nose, mouth and eye areas) when you are out and about and especially on public transport.
- Sometimes **an over the counter remedy** such as *First Defence* can help if taken when you first feel unwell.

## I ALREADY HAVE AN INFECTION – WHAT CAN I DO?

**Once you have the infection nothing will prevent it from running its course but you can and should treat the symptoms.**

- **Keep your nose and throat warm and wet.** Saline nasal sprays are soothing. They thin down mucus and wash away any inhaled irritants while the salt has a mildly antiseptic effect.
- **Drink plenty of water and keep well hydrated.** Mucus is predominantly made of water. If you do not drink enough, mucus will thicken and dry. You know you are properly hydrated when urine is almost colourless (‘pee pale’).
- **Steam is your friend.** It gets water safely to thick, dry mucus in the nose and chest, thinning it and making it easier to clear. It soothes irritation and reduces swelling of the mucous membranes.
- **Turn off air conditioning and reduce air convection heating.** Keep the

atmosphere more humid (open a window, keep leafy plants around, spray some water into the room or keep a wet towel over the radiator).

- **Beware decongestant medicines.** Decongestants temporarily shrink the nasal membranes by constricting blood vessels in the nose. The nose feels clearer for a short time before the constricted blood vessels dilate again and the nose re-blocks. Persistent use of these medications can create a vicious circle. If you really need them, follow the manufacturer’s instructions carefully and do not use them for more than 7 days.

## SORE THROATS

- **Sucking medicated lozenges can help reduce throat pain from an infection** but the claims of some companies may overstate the effectiveness

