

How can you help yourself?

- **Seek medical help:** make sure your larynx is healthy. If speech therapy is offered attend the sessions and practise the work regularly.
- **Reduce contributory factors:** Get help to give up smoking. Make sure health problems such as acid reflux are treated. Keep to the management plan provided and take any prescribed medications regularly. Reduce voice use in your social life. Choose quiet venues and give yourself time to rest your voice.
- **Reduce voice use at work:** Keep voice use to a minimum at work. Use emails instead of phones where possible. Ask colleagues to share phone work, meetings and presentations where this can be arranged. Use personal amplification when appropriate (*for information on personal amplifiers see: www.lary.org.uk*)
- **Presentations:** Use amplification whenever possible. Suggest meetings are held in quiet rooms with a good acoustic. Ask your audience to move closer. Make use of materials with an auditory commentary so you can rest your voice.
- **Hydration:** Voices work best when they are moist. Make sure you drink plenty of water during the day. Be aware of the drying effect of air conditioning and open windows more often when possible. Consider investing in a portable steamer and inhale steam during work breaks.
- **Atmospheric irritants:** use any protective masks provided. Make sure the workplace is well ventilated and that extractor fans are turned on. Report any that are faulty to maintenance.

Where to seek help: If you are worried about your voice seek help from your GP. The GP can identify and deal with many of the contributing factors in your voice disorder. They can also refer you to the ENT surgeon for examination of your voice.

The multidisciplinary voice clinic: If the voice problem does not respond to the treatment you have been given, you can ask to be referred to a voice clinic. The voice clinic can provide a detailed assessment of your voice using digital stroboscopy and plan appropriate multidisciplinary management. A list of NHS clinics is available on the BVA website – www.britishvoiceassociation.org.uk

The Lary Project – www.lary.org.uk: is specifically for people with voice disorders and has a helpful section on coping with work related problems. There is also a list of organisations that provide careers advice and support people with disabilities.

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VOICE DISORDERS AND THE WORKPLACE: an occupational hazard?



Are you an occupational voice user? Could you be affected by an occupational voice disorder?

Produced by the British Voice Association



What is an “Occupational Voice Disorder”?

An occupational voice disorder is one that develops as a result of the amount or type of voice use required to do your job. It may also be related to vocal irritants in the work environment or a combination of these factors. For example, teachers have to speak for hours every day in noisy classrooms, tour guides may be exposed to traffic noise and fumes, or call centre workers, who may speak for long periods, against background noise and in air conditioning which dries out their vocal folds.

What is an occupational voice user?

An occupational voice user is any person relying directly or indirectly on voice use to carry out their work. Professions depending directly on their voices include teachers, call centre workers, actors and singers. Professions relying indirectly on voice use include lawyers, salesmen, doctors or administrators.

What aspects of work can affect voices?

- The amount of voice use
- Noise in the workplace
- Room acoustics: Some rooms absorb noise so voices do not carry effectively
- Distance between the speaker and the listener
- Screens between the speaker and listener
- Air quality: dust, smoke fumes or air conditioning
- Intercoms/two way radios.

Not all voice disorders are related to the workplace...

They may be caused by vocal fold cysts/scars or injuries, infections, medicines, underlying medical conditions or social voice use. Whatever the cause, a hoarse voice will still affect us at work, making us less able to cope with voice use or making us more vulnerable to atmospheric irritants and noise.

Emotion, work & voice

Stressful situations, such as dealing with complaints, fear of losing your job, or strained relationships with colleagues can all affect voice production making the voice problem worse.



Your job and the law

Voice disorders do not automatically qualify as occupational disorders or as a disability. Each case needs to be considered individually and has to meet certain prescribed criteria. Criteria for prescription are laid down by the Industrial Injuries Advisory Council (www.iiac.org.uk). However, in cases where a voice disorder can be considered a disability, employers are required by law to make “reasonable adjustments” to help employees cope better in the workplace (*The Equality Act, 2010*).

How can your employer help you?

Talk to your manager/Occupational Health Department. People cannot help unless they know there is a problem. Describe the difficulties you are having and put forward suggestions you feel would help.

Your employer may be able to...

- Reduce the amount of necessary voice use by making adjustments to your work load
- Reduce background noise by providing a quieter office or turning off unnecessary music or machinery
- Provide amplification
- Arrange vocal training
- Allow time off for ENT/Speech and Language Therapy appointments
- Reduce exposure to atmospheric irritants by providing masks and ensuring that extractor fans are fitted and working.