

# *Seven Ways to Help Your Voice*



**Brisbane Voice Clinic**

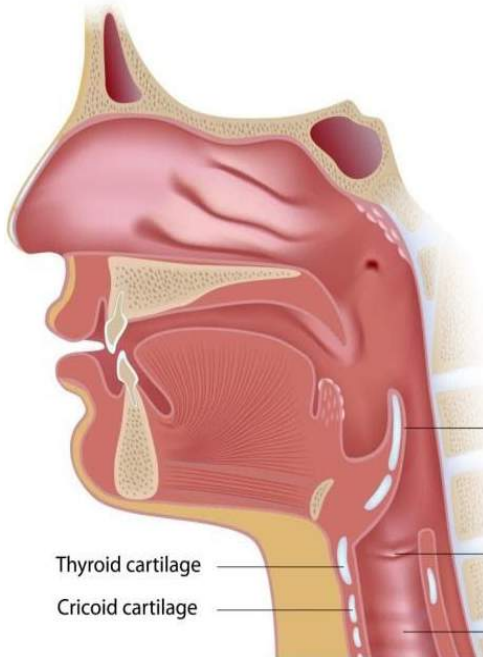
<http://loqui.com.au/brisbane-voice-clinic/>

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# About Your Voice

*View from side on*



Your Voice Box (Larynx) sits at the top of the airway. The vocal cords (more accurately called the vocal folds) sit inside.

Epiglottis

Vocal Folds

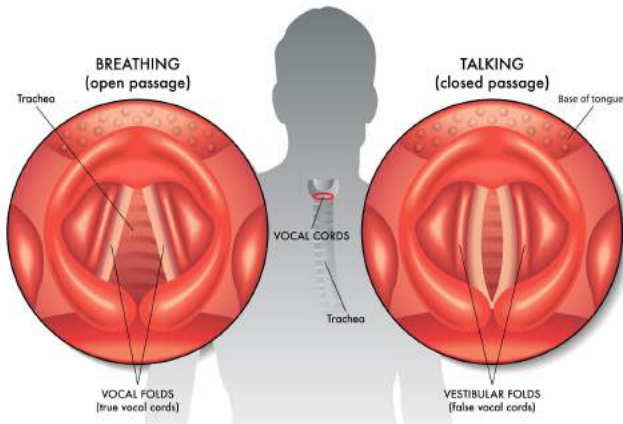
Trachea

The resting position of the vocal folds is OPEN, while we are breathing in and out.

The Vocal Folds CLOSE:

- for voicing (talking, laughing, singing)
- for coughing/throat clearing
- when we are doing heavy work e.g. lifting
- when we swallow

*View from above*



Here is [a video of the vocal folds](#) during voicing & breathing.

## When to seek help for voice difficulties:

[The 2018 Clinical Practice Guidelines for Hoarseness](#)

[\(Dysphonia\)](#) advise seeking help from an ENT for **voice changes lasting longer than 4 weeks**. They recommended earlier if there is a sudden loss of voice during singing/yelling/shouting or if your income relies on your voice (e.g. performers/lecturers).

The Guidelines also advise that:

- Examination of the larynx should include **stroboscopy-using strobe lighting** to see more precisely how the cover of the vocal folds vibrates.
- The larynx should be looked at with a video before voice exercises are prescribed.

This [video shows what can be seen with normal laryngoscopy and then with strobe lighting](#)

# 1. Get the Closure Right

The closure of the vocal folds when creating voice is a bit like Goldilocks and the Three Bears

## 1. If you under-close your vocal folds

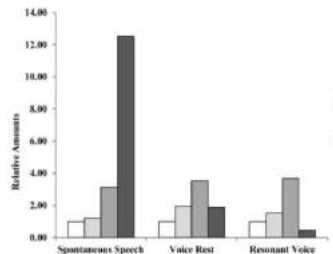
- Voice sounds very breathy, can't get a loud voice
- You will run out of air more quickly and you will dry your vocal folds out

## 2. If you over-close your vocal folds

- You will strain, using extra effort in both your throat and chest muscles
- You can cause damage to the vocal folds

## 3. If you get it just right

- It will feel effortless in the throat
- The voice will sound smooth
- You will be able to create a loud voice safely
- [It can help heal the vocal folds/reduce inflammation](#)



## How do you know if you have got the closure right?

1. It will feel effortless in your throat
2. It will sound smooth
3. You will feel vibrations along the top of your mouth, in your cheeks. This is often called "Resonant Voice"

**Area of vibrations with good voice. The exact location will change with pitch and vowel**



## Use a Semi-Occluded Vocal Tract (SOVT) Exercise

There has been lots of research to show certain sounds/tasks can help you get the closure just right.

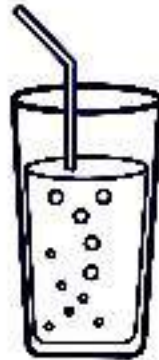
The sounds/tasks all narrow (semi-occlude) the airway downstream of the vocal folds. This creates a back pressure and can activate a brainstem reflex to adjust the closure of the vocal folds.

The sounds are:

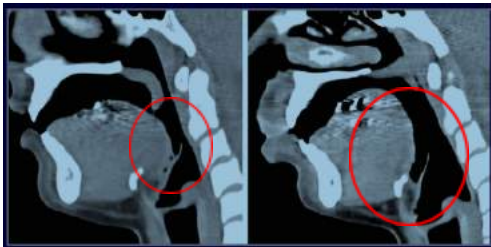
- **m, n, ng,**
- **v, r,z,**
- **lip trill, tongue trills.**

Other techniques include voicing through:

- **a straw into air or water**
- **a kazoo**



These techniques also tend to increase the space above the vocal folds so that there is effortless amplification of your voice.



**No straw**

**Straw**

These tasks have been used for centuries by singers and actors to develop the most efficient voice. There is now a large body of research explaining why and how they work.

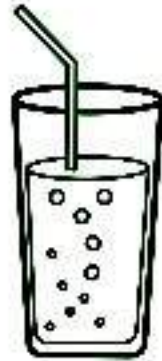
## These can be used for:

- warm-ups,
- healing minor swelling of the vocal folds,
- improving projection,
- working on mixed voice/register change

### Adding a second source of vibration:

Lip Trills, Tongue Trills and Voicing through a straw into water all add a low frequency (pitch) source of vibration. This can help shake the muscles of the vocal tract, helping them to release unnecessary tension.

You can see the shaking of the walls of the throat in [this video from 11 seconds](#).



Your Speech Pathologist will help you find the sound/straw diameter/depth in water that is best for you and show you how to transfer it to your everyday voice.

## 2. Breathe in Some Steam and Keep up the Fluids



### Why is it helpful?\*

1. If the surface of the vocal folds becomes dry, they can become sticky and cause you to strain to produce voice. Breathing in steam gets moisture straight to the surface of the vocal folds. The heat may also help to:
  - o Soothe an irritated larynx by providing a gentle alternate sensation
  - o Relax muscles within and around the vocal cords
  - o Reduce unnecessary or unproductive coughing
2. The vocal folds also need to have enough moisture on the inside to work well. This comes from what you eat and drink.

### How to do it

- Use water at ~90 Degrees Celsius** (there are kettles available to control the temperature of the water, or make sure you wait a few minutes after boiling)
- Use a mug, [dedicated steam inhaler](#), or thermos** (handy to carry around if you want to steam several times across a few hours). You don't need to set up a mini tent with a towel over a hot bowl
- Breathe in through your mouth** – you want the steam to go directly to your larynx. If you do have some nasal congestion, it is okay to alternate between mouth and nose breathing
- Don't add any oils**, as these may cause irritation
- Drink adequate amounts of fluids** for your physical activity and climate

*\*It is acknowledged that there is currently debate amongst voice professionals as to the mechanisms through which breathing in steam might be useful.*



### 3. If it's Effortful or Hoarse, Give it a rest

If it feels more effortful to talk &/or your voice sounds hoarse/rough/gravelly or lower in pitch:

There is likely some vocal fold swelling happening. The more you talk, the more likely you are to increase the time you have the swelling.

You are especially at risk if you are trying to talk loudly/shout.

At these times you want to reduce your voice use as much as possible.

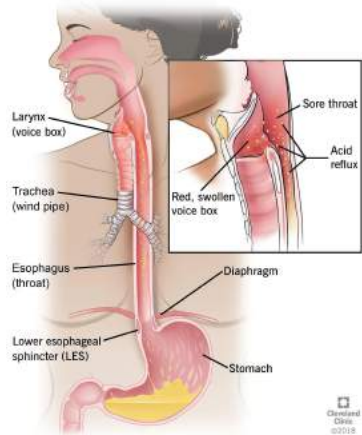
Stick to the most important messages and find other ways to get your message across, e.g. text or email rather than make a phone call.



## 4. Manage Reflux

### Why is this helpful?

- Reflux is the return of stomach contents up into the oesophagus and sometimes this pops over into the larynx/voicebox.
- Stomach contents are generally acidic and cause damage to the larynx. Reflux often also contains pepsin which becomes active in an acidic environment. The pepsin is meant to break down food, but in the throat and larynx it can damage the lining and cause the muscles to tense up.



- **Once reflux has occurred, acidic foods or drinks can cause further damage to the throat and the oesophagus**

### How to Do it:

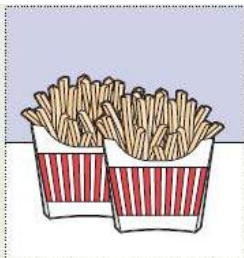
- Take any medication prescribed by your doctor.

### Food and Drink Tips

- Be careful with acidic foods and drinks, especially tea, coffee, all carbonated drinks, juices, many fruits, sports drinks, and fatty and spicy foods
- Be careful with alcohol and coffee as these may increase reflux



1 Avoid fizzy drinks and caffeinated or highly-acidic fluids



2 Avoid high-fat foods



5 Chew gum after meals



6 Bend from the knees rather than the waist



7 Avoid smoking



8 Avoid eating within three hours of bedtime

## Other Tips

For at least 30 mins after eating avoid bending your waist (see picture below, bend from the knees instead)

Try to eat your main meal at least 3 hours before bedtime and at least 1 hour before singing

Raise the head of your bed so that your head is well above your waist

(15-20cm was the recommendation from this study)

**Sleep on your left hand side if you can** – this directs the stomach contents away from the connection between the oesophagus and the stomach

[Pictures from Shaw 2010](#)

See also

<http://www.refluxcookbookblog.com/>  
[Royal Australian College of General Practitioners](#)

## 5. Check Your Medications

### Why is this helpful?

- o Many medications can have an effect on your voice, through causing dryness or irritation. Sometimes there are alternative forms of the medications that may have less of an effect or no effect on your voice.
- o If there is no alternative, being aware of the side effects means that you can help counteract them (e.g. drinking more water, or steaming more often).
- o Menthol and mints can irritate the throat and cause MORE coughing/throat clearing



### How to do it?

- Review your medications with your pharmacist, GP or specialist. The National Centre for Voice and Speech lists the medications that most commonly have an effect on your voice. <http://www.ncvs.org/rx.html>
- Choose sugar-free lozenges or gums without menthol or mints
- If you need to rinse your mouth/gargle after using an asthma puffer (typically a steroid), you should also rinse you vocal folds by breathing in steam**

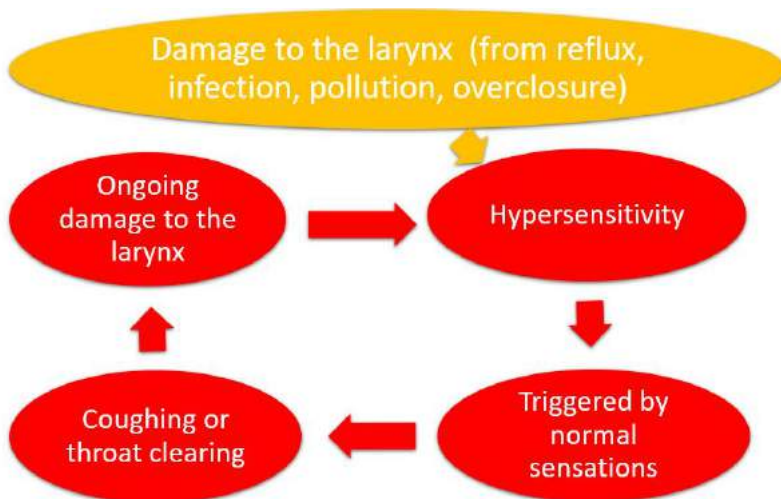


# 6. Replace Unproductive Coughing /Throat Clearing



## Why is this helpful?

- o Coughing and throat clearing are necessary actions to keep our lungs healthy. They help get rid of excess mucous.
- o However, many people with voice difficulties develop hypersensitivity within their larynx. This means that the larynx interprets normal sensations (such as air passing through, the mucous that covers the vocal cords) as threats and responds with coughing or throat clearing.
- o Coughing and throat clearing, if done excessively, can cause damage which further exacerbates the hypersensitivity.
- o The GOOD NEWS: You can learn to stop the cough by distractions and substitutions of other actions.



## How to do it?

All of these methods act as sensory distractors - sending alternate sensations to the brain - to override the tickle.

The more you use them, the less you will feel the need to cough.

- Keep a bottle or glass of water close by and sip on it when you first feel a tickle in your throat.
- Suck on sugar free lozenges (mint/menthol free!)
- Breathe through your nose rather than your mouth. This moistens the air and is less likely to be irritating to your throat.
- Hold your breath for 5 secs
- Breathe out through pursed lips
- Use a Cough Suppression Swallow:
  - o Press your hands firmly together,
  - o Look down at your knees and do a strong swallow



## 7. Use Earplugs in Noisy Environments

### Why is this helpful?

- o When we are in noisy environments we automatically (through a brainstem reflex) raise our voices, which often leads to overclosure of the vocal folds leading to damage
- o Earplugs help us to hear our own voice better and produce our voice more safely

### How to do it?

- Purchase foam ear plugs from your local pharmacy or supermarket (foam have better noise reduction ratings than silicone)
- When in noisy environments (e.g. pub, foodcourt, gigs/concerts, sports events, RSL, some cafes) pop an ear plug into one ear and notice the load taken off your voice!
- If you regularly sing or play music you should invest in musician specific ear plugs or in ear monitors.



## About the Brisbane Voice Clinic

Elizabeth Savina and Bernadette Dutton are Certified Practising Speech Pathologists with extensive experience in the assessment and treatment of Voice, Chronic Cough and Swallowing Difficulties.

They have both worked in major hospitals in Senior ENT positions and are passionate about helping patients to get their voices back into gear. Elizabeth and Bernadette conduct choirs and are skilled singers/performers, having a special interest in contemporary and folk styles.

The Brisbane Voice Clinic works out of the Headache Neck and Jaw Clinic in Nundah. This allows them to collaborate with physiotherapists expert in the Head & Neck for patients with complicated head and neck/musculoskeletal conditions.

### Our Services include:

**Saturday appointments** in addition to standard business hours  
**Video-conferencing/Tele-health** for patients in regional and remote Australia

**Workplace and Home Visits** (North Brisbane and Moreton Bay Regional Council Area - Travel Costs additional)

We can offer twice weekly appointments if higher intensity therapy is likely to be of benefit.

### Contact Us:

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