

PATIENT BROCHURE

ENT |

Voice problems in adults

Acibadem Amsterdam

The purpose of this brochure is to provide you with information about voice problems in adults. If you have recently seen an ENT doctor because of difficulties with your voice, you can read more about it here.

How important is speaking?

Speaking is the most commonly used means of communication among humans. In many professions people often have to use their voice, for example in education and in sales. In case of voice problems you may be hindered in your speech and thus in your functioning. When you speak, you give information about emotions in addition to the content of your words. For example, you can say the same phrase cool and distant or warm and cordial. A deviating voice can therefore give a wrong impression of your mood.

How do you make the voice sound?

Sound originates in the larynx (Adam's apple) which forms a connection between the trachea and the pharynx.

The vocal cords are located in the larynx. These are two folds that can be brought together by muscles to close off the trachea. If the vocal cords are held together, they can be vibrated by the exhaled air. This vocal cord vibration causes the sound that can be heard. By changing the tension in the vocal cords, the pitch of the sound changes. This tension change also takes place through muscle movements. Of course, not only the larynx is used when speaking. The voice is converted into different sounds by movements of the lips, tongue, palate and throat.

Voice disorders

Which types are distinguished?

If there are abnormalities in the vocal cords, this affects the vibration of the vocal cords and thus the sound that is made. In general, this manifests itself in a form of hoarseness.

Infection

The most common reason for hoarseness is an infection. Almost everyone is hoarse with a cold from time to time. Often the infections are caused by viruses and heal on their own. Even if there is a bacterial infection, this is often the case. In severe or chronic infections, prescription of medication may be necessary. A possible source of infection will be sought, for example in the paranasal sinuses.

Irritation of the vocal cords

Irritation of the vocal cords can also result from stomach acid getting into the throat (laryngeal reflux), smoking, or allergy. Lung problems can also lead to vocal cord irritation. Vocal cords are used for coughing, so frequent coughing can lead to irritation of the vocal cords with vocal complaints. Inhalation medication for the lungs can also irritate the vocal cords.

Swelling of the vocal cords

There are several benign swelling of the vocal cords.

- **Vocal cord nodules**

The most common benign are vocal cord nodules. These are the result of forcing the voice too much and can often disappear with speech therapy. In some cases this will not be the case and if the speech therapist has ensured that the patient has learned to use the voice correctly, the ENT specialist can surgically remove the nodules.

- **Vocal cord polyps and vocal cord cysts**

Benign polyps and cysts of the vocal cords can also interfere with speech. Often surgical treatment is indicated for these conditions. Speech therapy treatment will be advised before surgery to support the healing of the vocal cords afterwards.

- **Reinke's edema**

Smokers may experience a more diffuse swelling of the vocal cords, this is called Reinke's edema and causes the hoarse "smoker's voice". In case this is found it is very important to stop smoking completely. This swelling will usually disappear within a few months. If this not is the case, the ENT specialist can surgically remove this swelling six months after smoking has been quit.

- **Vocal cord paralysis**

A rare cause of voice complaints is paralysis of one or both vocal cords. Besides hoarseness patients can also be short of breath. The ENT doctor will always conduct extensive research into what causes vocal cord paralysis. Sometimes vocal cord paralysis heals spontaneously, in cases where this does not happen, speech therapy exercises can be prescribed.

- **Vocal cord cancer**

Hoarseness can also be caused by cancer of the vocal cords. This fairly rare condition occurs mainly in older, smoking men and can usually be cured at an early stage. At such an early stage, the treatment hardly affects the voice. The earlier the diagnosis is made, the better it is. When in slightest doubt about cancer, the ENT doctor will refer you to a university hospital for further examination and treatment if necessary.

- **Incorrect use of the vocal cord**

It is possible no abnormalities of the vocal cords are found in patients with voice problems. The voice sounds bad due to not using the vocal cords properly while speaking. The reason for this cannot always be determined. Sometimes people don't close their vocal cords properly after a vocal cord infection. Perhaps because they "spared" their vocal cords during the infection. Others close their vocal cords far too forcefully. Perhaps because they forced their voice during an infection.

- **Physical fitness**

Physical fitness can play a role in voice problems. When tired, the voice may not be used strongly enough. Emotions can also be a cause of incorrect use of the voice, for example due to excessive muscle tension. However, it happens that no clear cause is found.

What examination does the ENT doctor perform?

Your ENT doctor will check if you are using your vocal cords incorrectly. Sometimes this requires further investigation with a stroboscope. This device produces flash light, which makes the vocal cord vibration visible. It is possible that as a result of the examination it will be decided to refer to a speech therapist. You will learn from the speech therapist to use your voice better through exercises. Of course this takes some time and therefore patience and effort.

Vocal cord surgery

Sometimes surgery will be necessary to improve the voice. The decision to operate is always made after extensive examination and speech therapy is always advised around the operation, in order to optimize the healing of the vocal cords and the use after the operation.

The operation

The operation takes place under general anesthesia, in day treatment. When the patient is sleeping, the ENT doctor inserts a special tube in the throat to properly image the vocal cords. The teeth are protected with a special teeth guard. The abnormality of the vocal cord is removed with the aid of the operating microscope and micro-instruments. The tissue is usually sent for pathological examination.

After the operation

After surgery, it is important not to use the voice at all for wound healing for two full days. We call this voice rest. The following four weeks it is recommended to use as little voice as possible (see below). You can eat and drink anything.

There may be a trace of blood in the mucus or saliva in the first days after surgery, which is normal. The throat may feel a bit raw, but the pain can usually be suppressed with paracetamol. After a few weeks, the ENT doctor will see you again for a check-up, the further follow-up course is determined individually.

Risks of the operation

The risks of the operation are very small. Despite the mouthguard, in exceptional cases damage to the teeth can occur and it is also possible that the voice does not improve as much as hoped.

What can you do to prevent voice problems?

- Do not smoke; this is always bad for the vocal cords.
- Breathe through your nose and drink plenty of water or other fluids; if your mucous membrane dries out, it is fragile.
- Do not force the voice when you have a cold.
- Do not cough, scrape, whisper and scream.
- Speak calmly; if you speak too hastily, you will not have time to use your vocal cords properly.

FINANCIAL ASPECTS

This information concerns the insurance and reimbursement of your treatment. Do you have a referral from your doctor? Then your health insurance will cover 60%-100% of your treatment. We reimburse the remaining 40%-0% for you. So you don't pay anything extra.

Questions or suggestions?

If you have any questions after reading this brochure, please contact us at telephone number: 020 238 8800.

If you are of the opinion that certain information is missing or unclear, if you have any comments about this brochure or about the course of events during the investigation that may be useful, please let us know. Subsequent patients may benefit from this.

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What I still want to know:

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