Muscle tension dysphonia

What is muscle tension dysphonia

Muscle tension dysphonia (MTD) is a voice problem involving excessive or poorly coordinated muscle activity around the voice box. It can occur on its own or as compensation for another vocal-cord problem. The voice may sound hoarse, tight, strained or weak.

What causes it

MTD can be triggered by a number of factors, including:

- Vocal overuse or misuse (e.g. shouting, singing, excessive talking).
- Stress or anxiety.
- Poor posture or breathing technique.
- Reflux (acid coming up from the stomach).
- Recovery after a cold or laryngitis.
- Underlying voice conditions or compensatory patterns.

Symptoms

- Hoarse or breathy voice.
- Strained or tight voice.
- Throat discomfort or a sensation of a lump.
- Vocal fatigue – voice tires easily.
- Variability in voice quality throughout the day.
- Difficulty projecting the voice.

Diagnosis

Assessment usually involves an ENT or voice specialist and a speech and language therapist. A camera examination of the voice box is important to look for other causes and guide treatment.

Treatment

The main treatment for MTD is speech and language therapy. This focuses on:

- Reducing muscle tension.
- Improving voice technique.
- Teaching better breathing and posture.
- Managing contributing factors like stress or reflux.

You may be referred for therapy after review by an ENT specialist.

Self-help tips

- Avoid shouting or whispering.
- Rest your voice if it feels tired.
- Stay well hydrated.
- Practise good posture.
- Manage stress through relaxation or breathing techniques.
- Avoid throat clearing – sip water or swallow instead.

When to seek help

Arrange a GP review if hoarseness lasts more than 3 weeks, keeps returning or affects your work or daily life. Seek advice sooner if it is worsening or you have a neck lump, pain on swallowing, coughing up blood or unexplained weight loss.

Call 999 if you have severe breathing difficulty or noisy breathing with distress.

About this information

This leaflet explains the condition and common treatment choices. Your care team will advise what is suitable for you. If you have an operation, follow the specific preparation and aftercare instructions provided by your hospital.

Further information

Johns Hopkins muscle tension dysphonia