

I lost my voice — Now what? ^[1]

Dear Alice,

I lost my voice yelling and hollering. In general, how does somebody lose his voice, and what can I do to help myself?

Answer

Dear Reader,

You may be surprised to learn that yelling and being sick can lead to the same thing — a "lost" voice due to inflammation of the larynx, a.k.a., the voice box. It sounds like your swelling was caused by stress to your vocal cords, not an infection. The larynx houses the vocal cords. Sound is produced when air passes over them, causing vibrations that produce the sounds of speech. When the vocal cords, which are simply stretched "strings" of tissue in the larynx, become swollen and inflamed, the sounds become distorted and your voice becomes hoarse.

The same hoarseness can result from laryngitis, inflammation of the vocal cords due to an infection, which can be either bacterial or viral. Just like with yelling, the vocal cords swell which changes the sound of your voice.

Signs and symptoms of laryngitis may include:

- Tickling or scratching in your throat
- Sore throat
- Urge to clear your throat or cough
- Hoarseness or loss of voice
- Fever (occasionally)

You mentioned yelling as the primary cause of your voice loss. Smoking can also irritate the voice box and make hoarseness from yelling or from an infection more likely. Acid reflux can also worsen laryngitis. When you lose your voice, the best way to find it is to rest your voice for a day or two. Drink lots of liquids. Speak softly, but do not whisper. If the hoarseness lasts for more than a week, see your health care provider.

Some other treatment options:

- Suck on lozenges or chew gum.
- Avoid clearing your throat as much as possible.
- Gargle a few times a day with warm salt water.
- Use a humidifier.
- Avoid smoking and alcohol.

Of course, the best medicine in this case is prevention. It would be helpful to understand what causes you to yell and holler. Is this a once-in-a-while occurrence at, say, a concert, disco, or sports event? If not, do you holler a lot at your partner, parents, friends, or colleagues? Is your yelling fueled by anger, frustration, or stress? If so, has this been effective? Are there other ways to make sure you are heard, without making yourself sick? Getting to the root of when and why you yell is the first step at figuring out how you can prevent it in the future.

Best of luck finding your voice,

Alice!

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