

A young person's guide to vocal health





**A YOUNG  
PERSON'S  
GUIDE TO**

**VOCAL  
HEALTH**

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**WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY DAVID WALSBY**

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*To my husband, Christopher, and son, Thomas.*

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**Olivia Sparkhall, April 2022**



# Foreword

I am thrilled that Olivia Sparkhall has created such a valuable resource for young people. Having a voice is fundamental to our identity, expression, and communication; if the health of our voice is compromised, our identity is also affected.

For young people, who are finding their voice in the world, this is an essential read. The book presents a balanced view on use and abuse of the voice, it dispels some myths and gives easy to follow practical advice. Health and wellbeing is a complex interaction of the mind, the body and the environment; all of these aspects are illustrated here, against the background of growth, change and development.

*A Young Person's Guide to Vocal Health* is immensely practical, relevant and well-researched. This is an essential resource for those who sing and act as well as their teachers.

## **Jenevora Williams, PhD**

Singing Teacher and Voice Rehabilitation specialist, and author of *Teaching Singing to Children and Young Adults* 2nd Edition.

# Introduction

Your voice matters. Of course it does. You want to be able to speak and sing, clearly and freely. But how much do you actually know about your voice and how to keep it working well for you? This book aims to answer all of your questions, even the ones you hadn't thought to ask!



As your voice is part of your body, things which might seem unrelated to your voice can affect your vocal health. Each of the sections in this book covers a different aspect of voice health and, within each, key words or terms are colour-coded as follows:

## Colour key

Anatomy/muscles - violet

Hormones - indigo

Water - blue

Cool down - light blue

Healthy - green

Unhealthy - brown

Warm up - orange

Very important - red

Recovery - dark red

Breathing - grey

In addition to the colour coding, you'll find sticky notes to inform and help you.

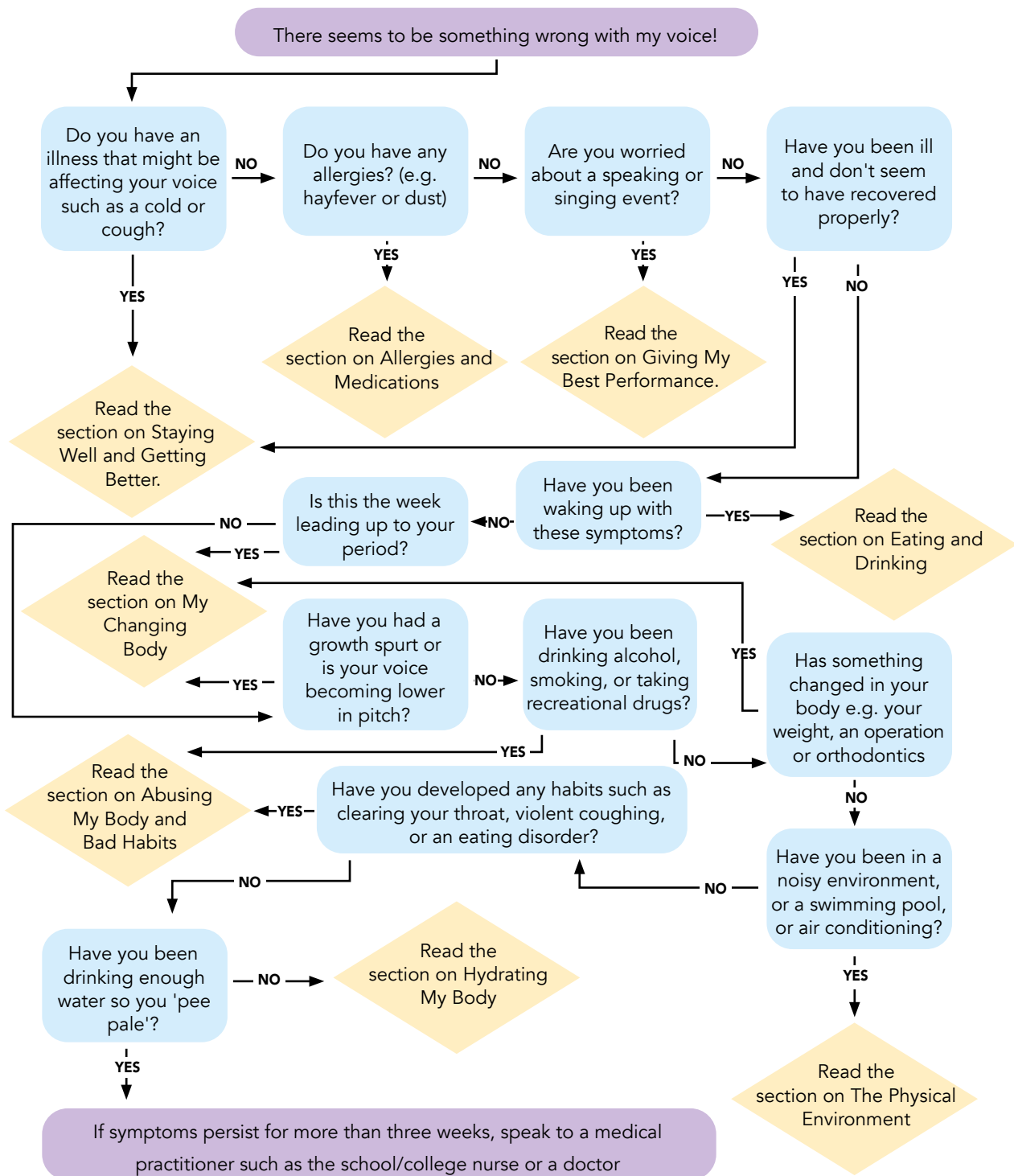
*Sticky notes are used to give you extra bits of information, hints and tips.*

*You will also find short definitions of words on them with more detail included in the glossary.*

My aim is to help you to keep a **healthy voice** and to explain what is going on when your voice seems to have **gone wrong**. There is a reading list (books and websites) at the back so that you can explore things further if you wish.

# My Voice Matters Flowchart

Your roadmap to good vocal health



# 1 What is my voice and how does it work?

🎵 making a sound

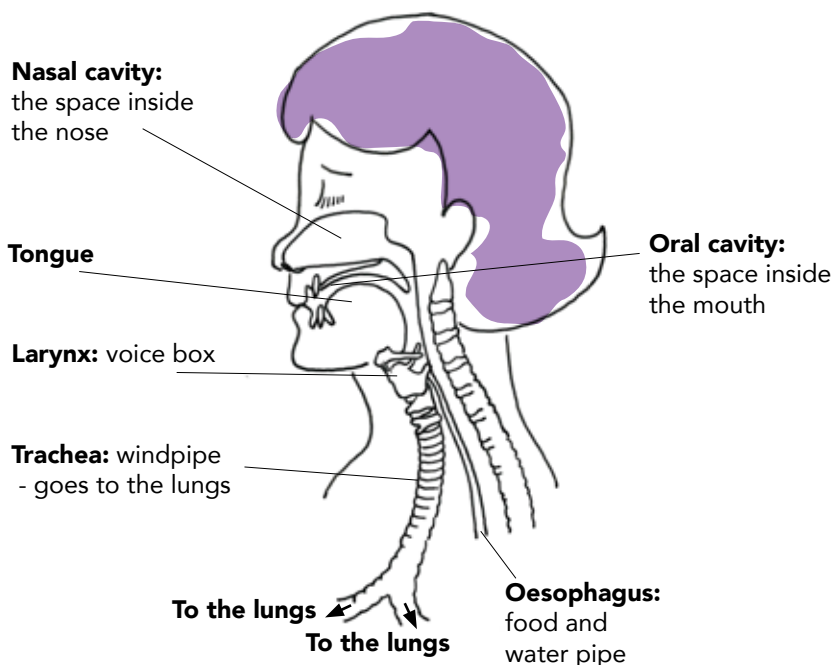
🎵 anatomy

🎵 function

Inhalation = in-breath  
Exhalation = out-breath  
Vocal tract includes inside  
your neck, throat, mouth  
and nose  
Larynx = voice box

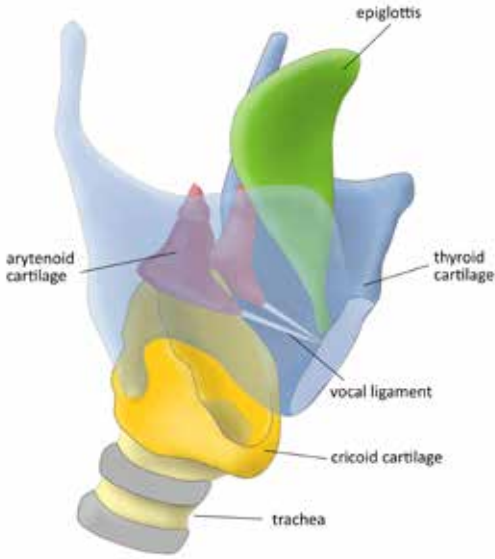
## Making a sound

When your **vocal folds** vibrate together you make a sound. Air has to move between the folds to make this happen, and this almost always takes place on an exhalation. The sounds you make are shaped in the **vocal tract** (the area between your **larynx** and your **lips**) using **muscles** including your **tongue** (which is also a muscle).



# Anatomy

We can take a closer look at the **larynx** to see how it works.



The **epiglottis** covers up the **trachea** (tube down to the lungs) when you are eating or drinking to stop food and drink going down the wrong way.

The **cartilages** move to help you change voice register (when you go from low voice to high voice).

The **cartilages** also form an protective cage around the delicate **vocal folds**.

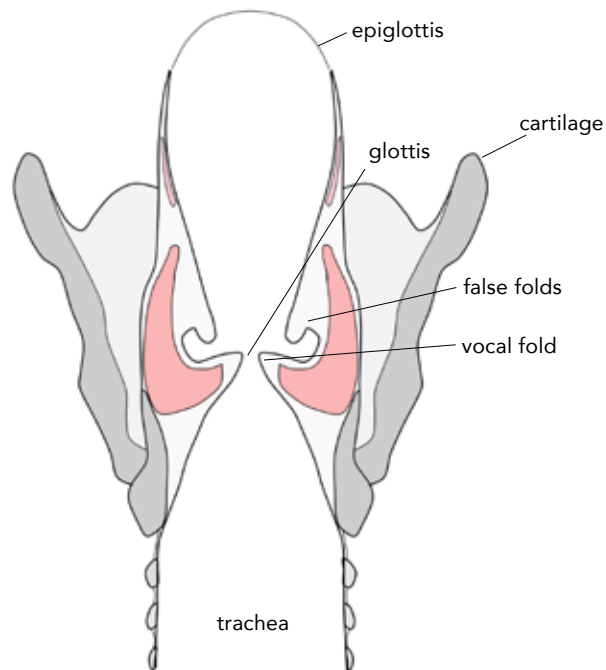
The side view of the Larynx.  
Image courtesy *A Singer's Guide to the Larynx*.

Now let us have a look inside from the back to the front. Remember you are standing behind a person, looking at their neck. Imagine someone has removed their spine.

The **vocal folds** open and close very quickly to create a sound. They rely on air being pushed up from below to do this effectively.

The whole area around the **vocal folds** (the **mucosal membranes**) needs to be moist like the inside of your mouth in order to work well.

Lubricating fluid is produced in the **false folds**.

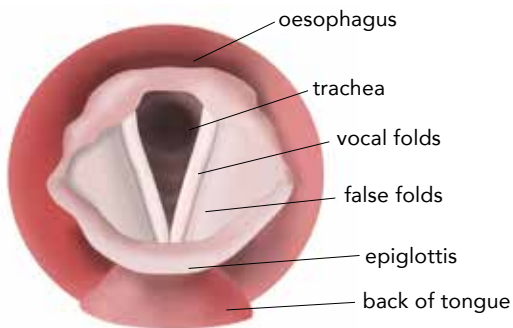


**Q** What is the proper name for the vocal folds?

**A** Vocal folds is probably the best description, but you might hear them called 'vocal cords' or 'vocal chords' because they look a bit like string.

Finally, we are going to chop someone's head off and look down their neck at their **vocal folds**. We are standing in front of this person.

**Glottis viewed from above – folds open**




In the left hand image above, the vocal folds are open and the person is breathing normally.

**Glottis viewed from above – folds closed**



In the right hand image, the vocal folds are touching. The person may be speaking or singing.

# 3 Hydrating my body

 The No.1 most important thing you can do to keep your voice healthy is to drink enough water.

If you are dehydrated you are...

more likely to get ill

going to find it harder to sing

more likely to develop voice problems

If you are dehydrated you will find it harder to produce your best voice.

Hydrated is your body having enough water to function well.

Dehydrated means there is not enough water in your body for it to function well.

Rehydrate is when you drink enough to allow your body to function at its best.

For your brain to function well it is important to be well hydrated.



# When, what and how much to drink

You need to **rehydrate** after sleeping, so morning drinking is key:



- 💧 Have **at least** 500 ml of water soon after waking
- 💧 Finish **another** 500 ml of water before the end of your first lesson (or at break)
- 💧 Drink **a further** 500 ml of water before lunchtime
- 💧 In the afternoon, drink **at least an additional** 500 ml of water

Most recent research on this topic says that school children should drink a **minimum of 2 litres a day**. Singers and those doing a lot of speaking will need to drink **more**, as will anyone who takes part in sports activities. In order to achieve this, you will need to **carry a water bottle with you** and know how much water it holds by either looking at the label or using a measuring jug to find out.

**500 + 500 + 500 + 500 = 2 litres;  
the minimum you should drink each day.**

**Q** How do I know I have been drinking enough?

**A** Pee pale!

**Q** What is that?

**A** Wee that does not smell and is almost clear in colour.

**Q** But my wee is green!

**A** This might be medication, vitamin supplements, food colouring or asparagus (which also makes it smell funny!)

'Pee pale' is good advice but is not always completely reliable. Other indicators to your needing to drink more are: feeling thirsty, having a headache, and feeling dizzy or faint.

You will need to **drink more** if

- 🎵 you are in a **rehearsal** (singing or speaking)
- 🎵 you are **exercising**
- 🎵 the weather is **hot**
- 🎵 you are in an **air-conditioned** environment
- 🎵 you have been **swimming**

### Drinking during a rehearsal

- 💧 washes away irritants
- 💧 moistens dry throats (from mouth breathing)
- 💧 helps **mucosal membranes\*** repel bacteria
- 💧 makes sure you are **hydrated for tomorrow**




Your **mucosal membranes** (\*cells around your vocal folds) need to be plumped up. This only happens if your body has plenty of processed fluid available.

You can think of this as:

**today's drinking = tomorrow's hydration**




Is it ok to  
drink coffee?



Are there  
any things  
I shouldn't  
eat or drink?



Does hayfever  
affect my  
voice?



How is the best  
way to recover  
after being ill?

# About the author



Photo: Ash Mills

**Olivia Sparkhall MA, PGCE** is a voice specialist with a particular interest in helping young people to reach their vocal potential. She read for a Masters in Voice Pedagogy and has since had articles published on vocal warm-ups for children, choral music written by women, and composing for the community.

She is a teacher at Godolphin School, Salisbury, UK, where she directs the award-winning Godolphin Vocal Ensemble. In demand as a vocal workshop leader, Olivia has worked with many young choirs, and conducts massed children's choir concerts for the charity, Barnardo's.

An acclaimed composer, Olivia is published by Banks Music Publications, Encore Publications, and Chichester Music Press, as well as being part of the series research and editorial team for the Multitude of Voyces CIC Sacred Music by Women Composers set of anthologies.