

22. Speech Problems

People with cancer of the brain or head and neck may experience difficulties with their speech. However it can occur with some other types of cancer as well. People may feel frustrated and embarrassed by their speech difficulties. It can be socially very isolating as people may not try to talk to them and ask their partners/carers questions instead. They may find that people pretend to understand them, thinking this is helpful. The social aspects of the speech problem and prejudice that people experience can be distressing. For some people, a change in their voice will only be a minor, temporary problem and their speech will return to normal, or near normal, as the tissues heal. For others, it will be more of a problem and will cause permanent changes to the way they speak. People may experience the following difficulties:

- **A change to the way the voicebox works – Dysphonia**

The voice may lack power, have an altered tone or sound hoarse. This may make it difficult for them to be heard in noisy situations or to use the telephone.

- **People may have had their voicebox removed – Total laryngectomy**

When the voice box is removed the person has to learn to talk in a completely new way. They may use a machine against their neck (artificial larynx), a speech valve, oesophageal voice, mouthing and/or writing. The breathing mechanism is altered and the person will breathe through a permanent hole in their neck (stoma). They will need to put their thumb over the stoma to produce voice with the speech valve.

- **A change to the way the muscles of the mouth are able to move – Articulation difficulties**

This causes difficulty with articulation or pronunciation of words. The person's speech may be slow, imprecise or slurred.

- **Difficulty thinking of the words to use – Aphasia**

The person knows what they want to say but finds it difficult to think of the correct words. They may use the wrong word or stumble over words. The speech may be slow and difficult to make sense of. Sometimes the person may have difficulty understanding other people's speech as well as talking. In this situation reading and writing may be affected as well and so it is not always possible to use writing as an alternative way to communicate.

How can I manage my speech problems?

- It is important for you to take time to adjust to the changes you are experiencing whether these are temporary or permanent. The reactions of strangers may be harder to get used to, but will get easier. It often helps if you can put your listener at ease by simply explaining that you have had treatment that has made it difficult for you to talk.
- You are not alone in having these difficulties and it can be helpful to talk to others who are experiencing the same problems as yourself through a support group. (See list of support groups in your area.)
- Carrying a notebook and pen can be useful to aid communication.
- Losing the ability to speak normally can be frustrating and distressing. (*See Anger and Frustration elsewhere in this directory*)
- A referral to a speech or language therapist can help you learn to communicate in the clearest and most effective way.

Local Resources:

Resource	Contact Details
Speech and Language Therapist	Chloe Jarvis – Macmillan Speech and Language Therapist (SALT) Referral through your Cancer Nurse Specialist or the Mustard Tree Macmillan Centre staff
<p>Livewell South West: Panic This workshop aims to break down some of the myths surrounding panic and help you to manage your panic attacks.</p> <p>Managing Anxiety This one hour workshop provides information on the psychological and physical symptoms of anxiety and strategies to manage this including breathing, goal setting and cognitive behaviour therapy</p> <p>Managing Stress This one hour workshop introduces the symptoms of stress and how the body responds, and provides simple strategies to manage this</p>	<p>Livewell South West: To book a place on any of the 1 hour workshops please call: Tel: 01752 435419 or Email: plymouthoptions@nhs.net</p>
<p>Mustard Tree Cancer Support & Triangle Drop In Centres Ask questions, share concerns, offers a range of services including benefits advice. Support, advice and information for cancer patients and their carers</p>	<p>Mustard Tree, Derriford Hospital: Monday to Friday from 9am to 5pm 01752 430060/01752 431468 Kingsbridge: Tuesdays 10am to 4pm 01548 852349 Liskeard: Thursdays 10am to 4pm 01579 373500 Tavistock: Fridays 10am to 4pm 01822 615935</p>
Other Resources	Your GP, Oncology Doctor, Specialist Nurse, District Nurse or Speech and Language Therapist.

National Resources:

Resource	Contact Details
For people with voice problems: Voice Care Network	www.voicecare.org.uk
For people without a voicebox: National Association of Laryngectomy Clubs Cancer Laryngectomy Trust	www.laryngectomy.org.uk www.cancerlt.org
For people with aphasia: National aphasia association Speakability Aphasia information	www.aphasia.org www.speakability.org.uk www.ukconnect.org
For people with oral cancer: Mouth Cancer Foundation	www.mouthcancerfoundation.org
Royal College of Speech and Language Therapy	Email: info@rcslt.org 020 7378 1200
Macmillan Cancer Support Provide comprehensive advice and information on all aspects of cancer.	www.macmillan.org.uk 0808 808 0000 (Mon-Fri, 9am-8pm)

Further Information:

Macmillan Cancer Support booklets: – available free from Mustard Tree Macmillan Centre

Controlling the symptoms of cancer

Understanding chemotherapy

Understanding radiotherapy
