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Upper airway health

Title of Leaflet	Upper airway health			
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Ref. No		Issue Date	May 21	Review Date May 23

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Speech and Language Therapy

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Information for patients, relatives and carers

Upper airway health

Your upper airway comprises of your nose, mouth and throat.

The following are general ways to improve the health of your upper airway. This will help reduce any irritation or dryness, and can improve conditions including coughing, throat clearing, globus (the feeling of something stuck in your throat) and voice problems.

1. **Keep well hydrated.** Aim to drink 1.5-2 litres of fluid a day (more if you are very active), the majority being water. Avoid caffeine and sweet or fizzy drinks, and drink alcohol in moderation.
2. **Avoid coughing and clearing your throat.** This causes a vicious cycle of irritation and tension in your throat, which makes symptoms worse. Sip water and swallow instead.
3. **Steam inhalation** is an way of directly hydrating the throat, and can help sooth feelings of dryness, irritation or tickling. You can buy cups called 'steam inhalers'.
4. **Protect your throat from acid reflux.** Symptoms of reflux can include heartburn and/or indigestion, but also coughing or throat clearing, excess mucous, or a feeling of a lump in your throat. This is caused by the acid 'burning' the throat.

Avoid problematic foods, such as fatty, spicy or sugary foods; caffeinated, fizzy or acidic drinks, and leave 3-4 hours between eating and going to bed. Tilting yourself in bed, with bricks under the legs at the head end or a foam wedge, can help minimise acid reflux at night. Gaviscon Advance is the most effective over the counter treatment (to be taken after meals, and before bed).

5. **Avoid irritants.** Chemical fumes (e.g. cleaning products or perfumes) and dusty atmospheres are irritants of the throat. Wear a mask if you work in environments with fumes/dust. Cigarette smoke is especially harmful and can cause voice changes, long term damage and ultimately cancer. Stop smoking, and avoid smoky atmospheres.
6. **Breathe through your nose.** The nose acts as a filter which cleans, warms and humidifies the air as we breathe in. Breathing through our mouths means that cold, dry air enters our throats which can cause dryness and irritation. Nose breathing also activates the diaphragm, and increases the amount of oxygen your body absorbs.

If your nose is blocked, congested or runny, or if you have post-nasal drip, a salt water rinse (NeilMed) or spray (Sterimar or Vicks Vapospray) can help.
7. **Be aware of the atmosphere.** Very cold air, dry atmospheres and air conditioning can all affect the throat, causing dryness, tightness and irritation. Breathing through your nose will help warm the air. If you are outside in the cold, wear a scarf around your mouth and nose. If you are in a dry or air-conditioned environment, try to get fresh air by opening the windows, use a humidifier, or use indoor plants to clean and humidify the air.
8. **Suck a plain sugar-free sweet, or chew sugar free gum.** This can help soothe the throat, particularly if you are struggling with discomfort or the urge to cough/throat clear.

Avoid any medicated lozenges or those containing menthol or other strong substances, as these can irritate the throat.