Losing your Voice Box
Patient Education
WARNING: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander viewers are warned that the brochure may contain images of deceased persons.

Disclaimer
The information contained in this brochure is for general information only. Readers should always seek independent, professional advice where appropriate. Sir Charles Gairdner Hospital will not accept any liability for any loss or damage arising from reliance upon any information in this publication.

Please refer any questions about this information to your treating medical officer and/or nursing and allied health staff.
What is a Laryngectomy?

A laryngectomy means the removal of your voice box (larynx). You may need to have this done if you have cancer in your voice box.

When the doctors remove your voice box they make a hole in your neck; it is called a stoma.

After the surgery you can only breathe air in and out of this hole. This hole leads to your lungs so you need to make sure dust, flies or water doesn’t go into it. You also need to make sure the hole doesn’t close up as you won’t be able to breathe if it does.
Talking after surgery

Your voice box contains your vocal cords and they vibrate to make the sound of your voice. If you don’t have a voice box you need to learn to talk another way.

Talking with a valve

An extra hole inside the stoma can be made by the doctors during the surgery. A valve can be placed into this hole and it will allow you to talk.

Your Speech Pathologist will show you how to look after the valve and will give you some equipment to carry with you all the time.

It is important to look after the valve as you can get into a lot of trouble if you don’t.
Talking with a Voice Machine

You may be given a voice machine (electrolarynx). This machine produces sound and can be used on the neck or in the mouth.

The sound of the device travels into your mouth and when you want to talk you just need to move your mouth the same way you used to. Your Speech Pathologist will show you some devices and will work out which is the best one for you.

It can take a bit of practise but it is important to be patient and listen to the advice from the Speech Pathologist.
Swallowing after surgery

When the doctors do the surgery to create the stoma they also separate your breathing tube from your food tube. You won’t be able to eat or drink for a couple of weeks after the surgery and you will be fed through a feeding tube that goes into your nose, to your stomach. The doctors will tell you when it is safe to eat and drink. If you start eating or drinking too early you might damage the structures inside your neck.

When you start to eat and drink, you might find it is a bit tighter in your throat when you are swallowing. You can start by eating softer food or have a drink when you eat to help wash the food down. The Speech Pathologist will tell you what foods you can swallow and the Dietitian help make sure you get the nutrition that you need.
Breathing after surgery

After a laryngectomy your nose and mouth don’t warm, moisten or filter the air you breathe.

You will need to use some equipment to help you breathe safely:

Use a nebuliser

The nebuliser will help moisten your phlegm and make it easier to cough out.

Wear a stoma cover

Special covers will be needed to help keep dust and flies out of your stoma. You can still breathe air through the covers but they help warm the air that you breathe. Talk to your Speech Pathologist about the different covers available.
Protect your stoma from water

It is very important that water doesn’t go into your stoma. You will need a special cover to put over your stoma when you are in the shower.

Check the size of the stoma

Your stoma should be no smaller than a five cent piece. If your stoma shrinks too much, you MUST see a doctor urgently as not enough air can reach your lungs. It is important that you wear a stoma button or tube to keep the stoma open.

Keep your stoma clean

It is important to keep your stoma clean and free from dried phlegm as the phlegm might make it hard to breathe.
Your nurse will show you how to care for your stoma and will provide you with the equipment you will need.

Please make sure you follow the instructions and that you use the equipment given to you.
Help from family

It is important that your family know how to look after the stoma so that they can help you if you are having problems.

Follow up appointments

You will need to keep seeing the doctors for regular check-ups after the surgery to make sure the cancer doesn't come back. It is very important that you attend these appointments.
Useful contacts / support services

Aboriginal Liaison Officer

Speech Pathologist

Cancer Nurse Coordinator

Social Worker

Physiotherapist

Dietitian

Occupational Therapist

If you have an immediate concern, please visit the closest Emergency Department or your GP.

Cancer Council Shop
Subiaco Store
334 Rokeby Rd, Subiaco, WA 6008
Phone: (08) 9381 5810

Cancer Council Helpline
13 11 20