

# Taking it to a higher pitch

By MONALISADAS

Young adults who want to improve their voice quality are seeking voice lift surgery. But experts say that it should only be used to correct medical conditions

IT'S A surgery that's set to take the concept of cosmetic procedure to a new high. For now it's no more about how you look, but also about how you sound. Voice lift is the latest minimally invasive surgery that promises to enhance the pitch, tone and overall quality of your voice. While it has gained popularity in the US as an anti-ageing tool (many oldies are opting for it to get a younger voice), in India it is being used by youngsters for a better voice quotient.

As we age, the surface of our vocal chords gets stiffer, thus making their vibration a challenge. So our voice turns hoarse with age and a voice lift becomes useful. This can be done by either inserting an implant (that can bring the vocal chords closer), or injecting fat or collagen (that can bulk up the weaker chords) the vibration of chords and voice quality can be improved. Interestingly, this procedure is gaining popularity among young urban Indians who desire a husky, improved voice.

"Teenagers and those in their twenties are the ones who are mostly enquiring about this surgery, because they have such high expectations of their voice quality," says Dr Chanchal Pal, otolaryngologist, Moolchand Medcity. Moreover, professionals such as radio jockeys, singers, theatre artists, teachers, etc are considering voice lift too, for it may add a fillip to their voice-centric career.

However, experts aren't too enthusiastic about such voice modification procedures. "Voice lift is not a medical term but a fancy name given to thyroplasty that was originally meant to correct vocal disorders such as chord paralysis or weakness," says Dr Ameet Kishore, senior consultant surgeon, ENT, Apollo Hospital. In fact, it's a tricky procedure that shouldn't be considered for cosmetic reasons at all. "The voice box is a very delicate part of the body. Even a slight variation in vocal chord positioning or length can make a huge impact in one's voice," adds Dr Pal. The results are not always positive and not worth the risk unless you have some serious medical problem.

"If at all you want to opt for the procedure, it's best to set realis-

tic expectations," suggests Dr Kishore. A voice lift can't make you a singing star overnight. It can only modify your original voice or help you sound a few years younger.

## IT'S NOT JUST ABOUT AGE

BASICALLY, we produce sound when our vocal chords meet each other at the rate of 120-220 times a minute. The body composition, shape of chest and neck, tongue position and tightness of muscles all play a key role in determining the pitch, volume, and tone of one's voice. Hoarseness occurs when the chords are unable to come closer and vibrate. While ageing is one of the most common reasons for weakness and stiffness of vocal chords, this can also happen due to other factors. Vocal abuse caused by untrained singing and shouting is one such reason. This often results in the formation of nodules, masses of tissues on the vocal chords.

"An injury or surgical trauma can damage the nerves that control vocal chords, leading to chord paralysis, which can alter one's voice. Even diseases or tumours in the chest, respiratory tract or neck can change your voice quality," points out Dr Kishore. Smoking is another culprit as it can cause friction at the edges of vocal chords.

Viral infections and excessive coughing trigger swelling in the voice box – a condition known as laryngitis – which also leads to hoarseness. "This could indicate medical conditions such as thyroid problems or chronic acid reflux. Recurrent presence of stomach acids in the throat may change one's voice," adds Dr Pal. If not corrected at the right time, a hoarse voice can become a permanent feature, causing irreversible damage to the voice box. Hence medical intervention becomes a must if you feel a change in your voice pattern over a period.

A hoarse voice could be indicative of chronic acid reflux, thyroid disorder, or infection in the respiratory tract

## THERAPIES AND DRUGS

IT'S BEST to try out some therapies if your voice is in trouble, say experts. They are known to correct a host of vocal chord disorders. A speech therapist works along with an ENT to assess the voice quality and pattern, and tries to identify the elements that are causing strain. "By following certain rules while speaking, eliminating harmful vocal behaviour and doing some vocal exercises, one can overcome many challenges, such as weak vocal chord muscles, cysts, and chord paralysis," says Dr Kishore. Many therapists use the technique of voice rest in their treatment. A simple vocal chord rest can greatly benefit those with chord injuries, nodules or stress.

Next come the use of drugs, especially if the hoarseness is due to some medical condition such as thyroid problems, infections or acid reflux. A host of antibiotics, anti-reflux drugs,

mucus thinners and steroid pills or shots come handy in such cases.

## USE OF THE SCALPEL

SURGERIES come as the last resort when drugs and therapies fail. "Microlaryngeal surgery is meant for minor deformities such as lesions, polyps, nodules and cysts in the vocal chord can be removed (with or without laser)," says Dr Kishore.

Another successful procedure is thyroplasty, that's mainly used in chronic cases of chord paralysis or weakness. The catch is to modify the shape or position of the chords – either pulling them closer or pushing apart – as the case demands with the use of implants or collagen shots. There are variations of this surgery, depending on the condition of the patient. It's known to benefit those who experience involuntary movement of muscles in their throat while speaking – a condition called spastic dysphonia. Also women with too high pitch can lower it with thyroplasty.

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GETTY IMAGES

## DO THIS FOR A HEALTHY VOICE

■ Drink plenty of water for vocal lubrication

■ Limit your intake of drinks that contain alcohol or caffeine as these irritate the mucus membranes.



■ Don't smoke and try to avoid second hand smoke.

■ Minimise throat clearing, as this is like slamming the vocal chords together.

■ Avoid anti-histamines, decongestants and anti-depressants as these tend to cause dryness in voice.

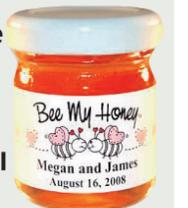
■ Avoid mouthwash or gargles that contain alcohol or irritating chemicals.



■ Do not cradle the phone when talking as this can cause muscle tension in the neck.

■ Take antacids for acid reflux as this causes acidic fluids to flow back up towards our throat and damage the tissue.

■ Have a spoonful of pure honey daily. Its anti-microbial properties counter the bacteria in the mucus and also helps sore throats heal faster.



## When the teeny voice persists

ADOLESCENCE is a tough period in life, with its own set of odd challenges. Puberty and hormone changes cause the voice to break. Some teens are particularly embarrassed by their high pitched voices. What's worse is

that this high pitched voice may not change for some even when they attain adulthood.

Experts call this "puberphonia" and say that this is caused by the delayed development of secondary sexual characters and

excessive emotional stress during teens.

But there are some therapies for correcting this problem. Vocal cord therapy is one good option and in extreme cases a phono surgery may be required.