



# Myasthenia Gravis and Speech

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## How can Myasthenia Gravis affect speech?

Speech is how we produce sounds and words. Having clear speech is essential for communicating your basic wants and needs, and ensures you can be easily understood by others. We use many muscles when talking, including muscles in our face, lips, tongue, and throat, as well as muscles used for breathing. In Myasthenia Gravis, the muscles used for breathing and speech can become weak. The term **dysarthria** is used to describe speech difficulties associated with muscle weakness. Dysarthria can affect your ability to say specific sounds and words, meaning that words may sound unclear. Dysarthria can also be characterised by reduced breath support whilst speaking, and an inability to vary the tone and rhythm of the voice.

## Symptoms related to dysarthria

- Difficulty pronouncing words or sounds correctly.
- Slurred speech or speech that isn't always clear
- Speech is difficult to understand by others (e.g., family or friends)

If you are experiencing any of the above symptoms, you may benefit from seeing a speech pathologist about your speech.

## How can a speech pathologist help with symptoms of dysarthria?

Speech pathologists can assess the muscles of your mouth, lips, tongue and face and provide advice about how to make your speech sound clearer. Please refer to the following pamphlets for more information on the role of a speech pathologist and how to access services:

- Role of the Speech Pathologist and Myasthenia Gravis
- Access to Speech Pathology Services

Myasthenia Gravis can also affect a person's voice and swallowing. For more information on the affect of Myasthenia Gravis on the voice and swallowing the following brochures can be found on the Myasthenia Gravis Association of Queensland website <https://www.mgaq.org.au/resources>:

- Myasthenia Gravis and the Voice
- Myasthenia Gravis and Swallowing

## Additional reading and resources

American Speech Language Hearing Association. (2021). *Dysarthria*. American Speech Language Hearing Association. <https://www.asha.org/public/speech/disorders/dysarthria/>

American Speech Language Hearing Association. (2021). *Dysarthria in Adults*. American Speech Language Hearing Association. [https://www.asha.org/practice-portal/clinical-topics/dysarthria-in-adults/#collapse\\_2](https://www.asha.org/practice-portal/clinical-topics/dysarthria-in-adults/#collapse_2)

Ayres, A., Winckler, P., Jacinto-Scudeiro, L., Rech, R., Padovani, M., Jotz, G., & Olchik, M. (2020). *Speech characteristics in individuals with myasthenia gravis: a case control study*. Logopedics Phoniatrics Vocology, 1-8. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14015439.2020.1834614>

Myasthenia Gravis Foundation of America. (2021). *Effects Of MG on Voice, Speech and Swallowing*. Myasthenia Gravis Foundation of America. <https://myasthenia.org/What-is-MG/MG-Materials-Webinars/Brochures-Learn-More-About-MG/effects-of-mg-on-voice-speech-and-swallowing>



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# Myasthenia Gravis and the Voice

## How can you take care of your voice?

Vocal hygiene strategies are healthy voice habits that you can use each day to protect your voice. You can use these strategies while waiting for an appointment with a speech pathologist.

**These may include:**

VOCAL REST	AVOID SPEAKING OVER BACKGROUND NOISE OR IN LOUD ENVIRONMENTS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Have periods of time throughout the day where you are not using your voice. For example, take 3 x 20-minute periods of reduced to no talking to rest your voice throughout the day.</li><li>• Avoid excessive talking to reduce strain on your voice.</li><li>• Excessive coughing and throat clearing also place strain on the voice. Instead, you can sip water.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• This will reduce the need to 'force' your voice to be heard by others.</li><li>• If possible, move away from the source of noise.</li><li>• Utilise gestures or facial expression to enhance communication.</li><li>• Face your communication partner so they can read your lips.</li><li>• Speak slowly to avoid the need for repetition.</li></ul>

**Please note:** These strategies do not replace speech pathology advice. Please arrange to see a speech pathologist if you are experiencing any of the above signs/symptoms.

Speech pathologists also assess and manage difficulties associated with swallowing and speech, which may occur because of Myasthenia Gravis. Please refer to the following pamphlets for more information about these difficulties:

- 'Myasthenia Gravis and Swallowing'
- 'Myasthenia Gravis and Speech'

Please refer to the following pamphlets for more information on the role of a speech pathologist and how to access services:

- 'Access to Speech Pathology Services'
- 'Role of the Speech Pathologist and Myasthenia Gravis'

## References

Nemr, N. K., Simões-Zenari, M., Ferreira, T. S., Fernandes, H. R., & Mansur, L. L. (2013). *Dysphonia as the primary complaint in a case of myasthenia gravis: diagnosis and speech therapy*. *Codas*, 25(3), 297-300.

Shrubsole, K., Davies, C., & Williams, K. L. (2021). *Do people with Myasthenia Gravis need speech-language pathology services? A national survey of consumers' experiences and perspectives*. *International Journal of Speech-Language Pathology*, 1-12. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17549507.2021.1961862>

Stachler, R. J., Francis, D. O., Schwartz, S. R., Damask, C. C., Digoy, G. P., Krouse, H. J., McCoy, S. J., Ouellette, D. R., Patel, R. R., Reavis, C. W., Smith, L. J., Smith, M., Strode, S. W., Woo, P., & Nnacheta, L. C. (2018). *Clinical Practice Guideline: Hoarseness (Dysphonia) (Update)*. *Otolaryngol Head Neck Surg*, 158 (1\_suppl), S1-S42. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0194599817751030>

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# Myasthenia Gravis and Swallowing

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## How can Myasthenia Gravis affect swallowing?

Swallowing is a complex process involving approximately 50 pairs of muscles. When we swallow, we use the muscles of our face, tongue, jaw and throat to move our food and drink from our mouth down to our stomach.

Myasthenia Gravis causes problems with the signaling of messages to these muscles. This can weaken the lips, tongue, jaw or throat which makes swallowing and chewing more difficult. Swallowing muscles can also become fatigued or weak, particularly towards the end of a meal, or if there is a lot of chewing required. This may lead to aspiration, where fluids go down the wrong way to our lungs, instead of our stomach. This difficulty with swallowing is called **dysphagia**.

## Symptoms related to dysphagia may include:

- Coughing, choking, or throat clearing during or after drinking and eating.
- A feeling of food or drink being stuck in the throat.
- Food or drink feeling like it goes down “the wrong way”.
- Taking a long time to eat a meal or eating slowly (30+ minutes to finish).
- Avoiding certain foods because you find them difficult to chew or swallow.
- Experiencing shortness of breath when eating or drinking.
- Frequent chest infections with no known cause, or unexplained weight loss.

## What should you do if you have symptoms of dysphagia?

The impacts of swallowing problems are varied. They can pose a risk to a person’s safety, as they may result in medical problems such as choking, pneumonia, dehydration, and poor nutrition. Swallowing problems can also make eating and drinking quite stressful and unpleasant.

If you think you may have dysphagia, it is **important to seek speech pathology input** as soon as possible to ensure your difficulties are managed appropriately. When you see a speech pathologist, they may examine the muscles involved in swallowing as well as observe you eating and drinking various foods and liquids. The speech pathologist may recommend changes to the consistency and/or texture of the food or fluids you consume, and/or strategies and exercises to help improve your ability to swallow safely.

## How can I swallow safely?

If you are experiencing any of the above symptoms, there are some general safe swallowing strategies which you can begin to implement while you are waiting to see a speech pathologist. These may include:

- Sit upright when eating and drinking.
- Chewing food well before swallowing
- Taking small bites of food and small sips of fluids
- Finishing one swallow before putting more food/fluid in your mouth
- Remaining upright for 30 minutes after meals
- Eat softer easy to swallow foods.
- Avoiding distractions whilst eating and drinking (e.g., talking, watching television)

**Please note:** These strategies do not replace speech pathology intervention. Please arrange to see a speech pathologist if you are experiencing signs/symptoms of dysphagia.





# Myasthenia Gravis and Swallowing

## What else Myasthenia Gravis can affect?

Myasthenia Gravis can also affect a person's voice and speech. For more information on the affect of Myasthenia Gravis on the voice and swallowing the following brochures can be found on the Myasthenia Gravis Association of Queensland website <https://www.mgaq.org.au/resources>:

- Myasthenia Gravis and the Voice
- Myasthenia Gravis and Speech

## Additional reading and resources

Umay, E. K., Karaahmet, F., Gurcay, E., Balli, F., Ozturk, E., Karaahmet, O., Eren, Y., & Ceylan, T. (2018). *Dysphagia in myasthenia gravis: the tip of the Iceberg*. Acta neurologica Belgica, 118(2), 259–266. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13760-018-0884-1>

The National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders (2010). *NIDCD Fact Sheet: Dysphagia*. NIH Pub. No.13-4307.

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**Myasthenia Gravis and the Voice**

**How can Myasthenia Gravis affect the voice?**

The lungs, voice box, tongue, mouth and lips all work together to help us produce voice. When it is inflated from the lungs and through the larynx, it causes the vocal cords to vibrate. This produces sound, which resonates through the air pockets in the nasal cavity, and is shaped into recognizable speech by the tongue, lips, palate, jaw and teeth. In Myasthenia Gravis, the muscles which control the movement of the vocal cords can become weak, which leads to difficulties generating and producing voice. This is called dysphonia.

**Symptoms related to dysphonia may include:**

- Hoarse vocal quality
- Rough vocal quality
- Vocal fatigue
- Difficulty controlling the pitch of the voice
- Periods of voice loss
- Nasal-sounding voice quality
- Monotonous sounding voice

**What should you do if you have concerns about your voice?**

Please advise your GP if you have any concern about your voice. This is particularly important if you have noticed any of the above symptoms. If required, your GP may refer you to see an ENT, Head and Neck specialist (ENT). The ENT will examine your voice box and provide advice about your voice. A speech pathologist can help by assisting your voice and providing specific advice, strategies and even voice therapy techniques to strengthen your voice. Speech pathologists also assess and manage problems associated with speech and swallowing, which can also occur as a result of Myasthenia Gravis.

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American Speech Language Hearing Association. (2021). *Dysarthria in Adults*. American Speech Language Hearing Association. <https://www.asha.org/practice-portal/clinical-topics/dysarthria-in-adults/#collaps2>

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We acknowledge these resources were developed in collaboration with the University of Queensland speech pathology students in 2021

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# The Role of the Speech Pathologist and Myasthenia Gravis

## What is the role of a speech pathologist and how can they assist people with Myasthenia Gravis?

Speech pathologists assess, diagnose and treat communication and swallowing difficulties. The difficulties caused by Myasthenia Gravis can affect your speech, voice and swallowing, and as a result you may benefit from speech pathology input. A speech pathologist can provide:

1. Assessment of your communication and swallowing difficulties.
2. Tailored interventions that are specific to your individual difficulties. These interventions may include a variety of exercises and strategies to help with your difficulties. Speech pathologists' intervention may also involve educating family and friends about how to support you with any voice, speech or swallowing difficulties.
3. Educate and advocate for their clients with family members, community services and healthcare professionals.

## Where do speech pathologists work?

Speech pathologists work in a variety of settings including hospitals, schools, community health care centers, residential aged care facilities and private practices.

Please refer to the following pamphlets for more information about how your voice, speech and swallowing may change due to Myasthenia Gravis, as well as how to access speech pathology services:

- 'Access to Speech Pathology Services'
- 'Myasthenia Gravis and the Voice'
- 'Myasthenia Gravis and Swallowing'
- 'Myasthenia Gravis and Speech'

## References

Speech Pathology Australia (2021). *What is a speech pathologist?* [https://www.speechpathologyaustralia.org.au/common/Uploaded%20files/Speech-pathology-services/Factsheet\\_What\\_is\\_a\\_SP\\_and\\_what\\_they\\_do%202024.pdf](https://www.speechpathologyaustralia.org.au/common/Uploaded%20files/Speech-pathology-services/Factsheet_What_is_a_SP_and_what_they_do%202024.pdf)

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# Access to Speech Pathology Services

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## Where can you access Speech Pathology Services?

**Public:** You can access speech pathology services through the public sector, in public hospitals, community health centres and residential aged care. Public hospitals around the state offer outpatient services for speech pathology. Contact your local GP to find out more information.

**Private:** You can also access speech pathology services through the private sector. Seek advice from your GP around selecting an appropriate private practice.

**University Clinics:** Some universities offer student-led speech pathology clinics, which operate under the supervision of a certified speech pathologist.

Some examples in Queensland include:

- The University of Queensland Health and Rehabilitation Clinics: <https://health-clinics.uq.edu.au/services/speech-pathology>
- Australian Catholic University Speech Pathology Clinic: <https://www.acu.edu.au/about-acu/faculties-directorates-and-staff/faculty-of-health-sciences/facilities-and-services/health-clinics>

**Speech Pathology Australia Website:** The Speech Pathology Australia database can assist you in locating a speech pathologist (both in the public or private sector) in your state or territory or regional area: [https://www.speechpathologyaustralia.org.au/SPAweb/Resources\\_for\\_the\\_Public/Find\\_a\\_Speech\\_Pathologist/SPAweb/Resources\\_for\\_the\\_Public/Find\\_a\\_Speech\\_Pathologist/All\\_Searches.aspx](https://www.speechpathologyaustralia.org.au/SPAweb/Resources_for_the_Public/Find_a_Speech_Pathologist/SPAweb/Resources_for_the_Public/Find_a_Speech_Pathologist/All_Searches.aspx)

*\*Please be aware that waiting times will vary depending on the demand for services at each clinic across all public and private service providers. Please contact your local General Practitioner (GP) for more information.*

## How do you get a referral to see a speech pathologist?

You can get a referral to see a speech pathologist from your local General Practitioner (GP), or any medical specialist.

## Is there a cost associated with seeing a speech pathologist?

Public speech pathology services including those at hospitals and community health centres are usually free, however you will have to check with each individual service. The cost will change depending on whether you are an Australian citizen and have access to a Medicare card. In the private sector, you will need to pay a fee to see a speech pathologist. The cost will vary across each private practice. If you access speech pathology services through a university clinic, the fees will be at a reduced cost compared to a private practice speech pathology service.

## Is there a healthcare plan for accessing a speech pathologist?

According to the Australian Government Department of Health, there are two different types of chronic disease management plans you may be able to access.

The two types include:

- GP Management Plans
- Team Care Arrangements

These plans will allow you to access speech pathology services at a reduced cost. Depending on the provider, you may have to pay an out-of-pocket amount. To find out more information please see your local GP or go the following website: <https://www1.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/Content/mbsprimarycare-chronicdisease-pdf-infosheet>

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