

# Role of the larynx and how to protect it

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A medical milestone at Mayo Clinic, a total larynx transplant performed on a patient with active cancer, has generated headlines recently in the medical world. But what is the larynx and what does it do?

When you talk, many parts of your body work together to make a sound.

The [larynx](#), also called the [voice box](#), plays an important part in the process.

Dr. David Lott, a Mayo Clinic otolaryngologist who led the first known clinical trial on laryngeal transplantation in the U.S., says that, along with [speech production](#), the larynx has a number of other vital roles.

"It is the primary organ that's responsible for your ability to speak, for your ability to swallow, to eat and drink, and to breathe," says Dr. Lott.

The larynx also helps sense when food is swallowed. Dr. Lott says it governs those functions in two ways.

"When we swallow, the [vocal folds](#) close. That movement is very important in terms of regulating how good the voice sounds, how good someone swallows and how good they can breathe," he explains.

Secondly, he says it's through the movement of the larynx itself.

"The entire larynx has to move forward and backward when you swallow to allow food to get into the [esophagus](#) so that it can get into your stomach," Dr. Lott says.

The best way to protect your larynx is to be in tune with your voice and know if something is off.

"Or if it's harder for you to speak, you can't yell or you can't sing, whatever it may be—be clued in that. Maybe there's something either functionally or structurally that may be going on," he says.

If you have lingering symptoms, consider seeking medical attention.

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