

## Nasalisation or When to speak through your nose

As many other languages, Gaelic has nasalised vowels. In linguist-speak that means that you lower your velum while making the vowel sound.

In other words, instead of air passing just through your mouth, some air also escapes through your nose. It is quite easy to learn how to nasalise vowels - just try to additionally breathe out through your nose. You can check whether you are doing the right thing both by listening to your own voice and - if you are still unsure - holding your hand under your nose - if you are doing it right, you will be able to feel your breath on the back of your hand.

So when DO you do this in Gaelic? Unfortunately, there is no simple rule and it also differs vastly from dialect to dialect which words are nasalised or not. Here are a few pointers though:

1. Nasalisation occurs mostly in the vicinity of nasal consonants **m**, **mh**, **n** and **ng**. Now you could argue successfully that due to the articulation process ALL vowels near a nasal are nasalised. We only talk about nasalised vowels however, if the nasalisation is audible throughout the vowel and fairly noticeable.

In some cases it is very important to nasalise the appropriate vowels as it affects the meaning of your statements, such as in:

**cha bhi** [xa vi:] 'will not'

**cha mhi** [xa vī:] 'I am not'

**a-bhàn** [ə'va:n] 'down' (mainland dialects)

**a-mhàin** [ə'vā:n] 'only'

**a Dhia!** [ə ɟia] 'Oh God!'

**a dhiamh** [ə ɟiã] 'yuck!'

**tàbh** [tɑ:v] 'fishing net'

**tàmh** [tã:v] 'rest'

This is not only restricted to the vowel immediately adjacent to the nasal, but can spread through the whole word and even affect consonants, e.g. in **màthair** [mã:ħiãr] 'mother' or **seanmhair** [ʃɛnɛvãr] 'grandmother'

2. High mid vowels are never nasalised. These vowels are [e] [o] and [ɤ]. Thus the following examples are never nasalised:

[e] **feum, leum, grèim, fhèin, meurag, mèilich**

[o] **mòr, modh, coma, ròn, bròn, tòn**

[ɤ] **coinnich, coinneamh**

3. Words with a helping vowel tend not to have nasalisation, even if they contain nasals, e.g.

**ainm** [ɛnɛm] 'name'

By the way, this kind of nasalisation has nothing to do with what happens to stops after the definite article in certain dialects (and Irish as a matter of fact). For this phenomenon read the pages on [Nasalisation](#) after the definite article.