

The Voice and Swallowing Institute

Voice Conservation & Vocal Hygiene: Tips for a Healthy Voice

What is vocal hygiene? Your voice, and the body mechanisms that produce voice, are meant to last a lifetime. But the vocal mechanism cannot tolerate excessive wear and tear. There are good habits – things you can do to take care of your voice. The following suggestions are meant to guide you in taking care of your voice and overcoming and preventing some voice problems. Vocal hygiene is positive change – suggestions that will make you feel better and make you sound better too!

Don't smoke. Smoking cigarettes, pipes, cigars and other substances can seriously harm your overall health, and damage the entire respiratory system including the upper airway, throat, mouth and nose. The heat and inhaled chemicals cause inflammation, swelling, sometimes irreversible damage, and cancer. The only way to counter the effects of smoking is to stop.

Eliminate habitual and frequent throat clearing. We all must clear our throats on occasion, but recognize that when you clear your throat you are “slamming” the vocal folds together hard. This can damage the vocal folds by causing inflammation and localized irritation. It is common for people to get into the habit of clearing the throat without even becoming aware of it. So first, you need to become aware of throat clearing, and then you can work on eliminating it. When you feel the need to clear your throat, try to sip some water first. If that is not effective, try to do a silent throat clear by closing your mouth and saying the “h” sound (as in “hello”), followed by a swallow. That sound should be silent because it is just air being blown between your vocal folds. Many times, frequent throat clearing is due to mucus in the throat (“postnasal drip”). Drinking a lot of water (8 glasses daily) during the day helps thin the mucus and decreases the need to clear.

Drink lots of water. The entire voice producing mechanism (mouth, throat, vocal folds and lungs, too) needs moisture to work efficiently. If you do a lot of talking (on the telephone, group meetings, one-on-one discussion) or singing, always have water nearby and take frequent sips. Sometimes, when people are not in the habit of drinking water, they don't even realize that they are thirsty until after they begin drinking. And water is good for the health of your entire body.

Control and limit vocal loudness. Do not speak louder than the situation or environment demands. Don't “compete vocally”. Avoid yelling, loud cheering, speaking over loud noises. Use non-vocal methods to get the attention of others (i.e., clap your hands, raise your arm, blow a whistle, ring a bell, turn lights on and off). Use amplification in large or noisy places. Don't try to “out talk” others by increasing loudness. Be aware of how you use your voice in talking over music, over the TV, communicating up and down stairs in the home, calling the dog, etc.

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Balance extra vocal demands with voice rest. If you have to give a lecture or you know that you will be speaking for extended periods of time, try to reduce voice use before and after these episodes. If you must talk a lot at work, try to reduce the amount of talking outside of work. Listen more and talk less. If you know that you will be using your voice heavily in the evening (giving a lecture, talking in a noisy environment), then rest your voice more during the day and after the evening is over.

Humidify the environment. Make sure that there is enough humidity in your environment. In your home you can use a humidifier, especially in the bedroom. At night when you sleep, you may breathe through your mouth more and swallow less than during the day, both of which will increase dryness. Small, portable humidifiers can sit on a corner of your desk at work. Individual steam inhalers can be helpful.

Use caution with medications (over-the-counter and prescription).

Decongestants, allergy medicines and some other drugs tend to release fluid from body tissues, including the vocal folds. If your doctor has recommended that you take these medicines, you need to try to counteract their drying effect by increasing your water intake. Ask your doctor if there are any alternative medicines that don't have such a drying effect. Remember, alcohol is a drug and has a strong drying effect, as does caffeine.

Give in to laryngitis. When you have true laryngitis, that is, hoarseness associated with an upper respiratory infection, the vocal folds become swollen and do not work properly. Do not try to override that or to force your voice. Use a very soft, easy and breathy voice or do not talk at all until the swelling resolves. Talking too loudly or too much when you are sick can harm the vocal folds.

Symptoms of laryngopharyngeal reflux disease (LPR). IF you have any one or more of the following symptoms often, you may have LPR: sensations of heartburn, a bad taste in the mouth especially in the morning, a rough voice in the morning, greater than usual difficulty warming up your voice, a burning sensation in your throat, or frequent sensation of excess mucous in the throat. You should talk to your doctor about this condition and obtain appropriate treatment. LPR can have an effect on the health of your vocal folds. It is possible to have LPR affect your voice even if you are not experiencing the "classic" heartburn symptoms. We will provide you with a separate sheet on LPR with many suggestions for you.

VOICE THERAPY

The purpose of voice therapy is to help you attain the best possible voice and the most relief from those symptoms that are bothering you. Voice therapy programs generally are made up of an educational component and a technical skills training

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component. The educational component includes an overview of normal, healthy voice production and vocal hygiene habits. The majority of the time spent in therapy sessions focuses upon the technical skills training component. This training consists of exercises to help coordinate breathing, producing sound and achieving the pitch, loudness and quality of the sound you desire in a way that is healthy for the vocal folds. The specific type of technical skills training will depend upon your specific voice disorder – the symptoms you are experiencing and the underlying cause.

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