



Duke Voice Care Center

Where everyone has a voice

HOW TO MAKE YOUR VOICE LAST A LIFETIME

VOCAL HYGIENE

"Vocal hygiene" can be thought of as the "care and feeding" of the voice. It refers to the things we do to keep the voice healthy. We work on improving how the larynx (or voice box) works through voice therapy, but it is also important to take care of the voice by taking care of the body and using the voice well.

HYDRATION:

KEEPING THE VOCAL FOLDS MOIST

Keeping the vocal folds moist through good hydration is very important for good voice health. We can provide moisture to the vocal folds both from the inside (internally) and from the outside (externally).

Internal hydration

To keep the vocal folds moist from the inside, make sure that you drink plenty of water. The vocal folds move best when the body is well hydrated, and well-hydrated vocal folds may be less likely to get hurt from voice use. Good hydration also makes the mucous that covers the vocal folds thin and slippery, so that they move against each other easily and vibrate smoothly. Think of the mucous coating as being like motor oil in the engine of your car: if it is thin and slippery, the engine runs smoothly; if it is thick and sticky, the engine doesn't run well and can be damaged.

- If you are under a doctor's care for any medical conditions, be sure to check with the doctor before changing the amount of water you drink
- We recommend drinking at least **eight eight-ounce servings of water per day** (total of 64 ounces). That's a little less than two liters per day.
- If you are drinking a lot less than that now, add a few ounces more each day until you get to 64 ounces.
- Alcohol and caffeine are drying to the entire body. Drinking them makes the vocal folds drier. Cutting back on caffeine and alcohol can help your body stay hydrated.
- Dry environments are also drying to the entire body. If you know that you are going to be in a dry place (like a dry building or an airplane), drink lots of water to keep your body hydrated.

If you don't like drinking water:

- Try flavoring the water with fruit or with sugar-free powdered drink mixes.
- Drink caffeine-free tea.
- Sometimes changing the temperature of the water makes it more enjoyable to drink.
- Foods that have a lot of water in them can help with hydration. Examples include cucumbers, melon, grapes, and gelatin.

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External hydration

External hydration is getting moisture to the vocal folds from the outside.

Steam inhalation: Inhaling or breathing steam helps the voice box stay moist and can be very soothing to irritated vocal folds. Breathe the steam through your nose for 3-5 minutes at a time, 2-3 times per day.

You can try any of these:

- Breathe shower steam.
- Breathe steam from a personal steamer. You can buy these at many drugstores.
- Run hot water into a sink or basin and inhale the steam. You can also boil water, pour it into a sink and breathe the steam. *Never breathe steam standing over a hot stove or boiling water.*
- Run a washcloth under hot water, wring it out and hold it over your mouth and nose and breathe in.

Room humidification: You can increase the moisture in your home or office by using a room humidifier or hot water vaporizer. Be sure to use a *hot water* vaporizer. Cool mist vaporizers can cause chemicals and germs to get into the air. With hot water vaporizers, only water gets into the air you breathe.

- Room humidity should be between 30-50%. You can check the moisture in the air in your home by using a hygrometer, which can be purchased at many electronics or hardware stores.
- The most important thing when using room humidifiers or vaporizers is to carefully follow the cleaning instructions in the package. If you don't keep the humidifier or vaporizer clean, germs can get into the air that you breathe.
- If you have mold or mildew allergies, you should not use humidifiers or vaporizers. They increase the moisture in the environment and can cause mold and mildew to grow.

Medications and hydration

Many medications, such as cold and allergy medications, are drying to the body. Try to avoid these medications to help your body stay hydrated. If you need to take these medications, you may need to drink extra water to make up for their drying effect. Of course, never change your medications without consulting your doctor.

Your doctor may recommend a mucolytic medication. This is a medication that can help keep mucous thin and slippery. These medications are available over the counter. The active ingredient is guaifenesin. Brand names include Humibid, Mucinex and Robitussin. Be sure to get the preparation that does NOT contain decongestants, antihistamines or cough suppressants.

Many cough drops and throat lozenges are drying to the mucous membranes of the mouth and throat. This is especially true for products that contain menthol and eucalyptus. The best lozenges for soothing the mouth or throat without drying are glycerin lozenges. Brand names include Grether's Pastilles and Dr. Doolittle's.

LARYNGOPHARYNGEAL REFLUX OR "ACID REFLUX"

What is "acid reflux?" Acid reflux refers to acid from the stomach backing up into the esophagus (or food tube). This is also called "acid reflux disease," "gastric reflux" or "gastroesophageal reflux" (GERD). If the acid travels up the esophagus and spills over into the voice box (or larynx), it is called "laryngopharyngeal reflux" or LPR.

Why is reflux bad for my voice? Stomach acid is very caustic. If it comes into contact with the voice box, it can cause irritation, burning or swelling. It can also make vocal fold injuries worse and slow down the healing process for these injuries.

What are the symptoms of reflux?

- Heartburn (although many people who have reflux do not have heartburn).
- Too much mucous in the throat, making you feel like you need to clear your throat often.
- Feeling a "lump" in the throat.
- Sour taste in the mouth.
- Burning feeling in the throat.
- Hoarse voice, especially in the morning.
- Coughing a lot or feeling a "tickle" in the throat.

How is reflux treated? Your doctor will decide the best treatment for acid reflux for you. He or she may recommend changing your eating habits to help your voice. Your doctor may tell you to:

- Avoid certain foods and drinks including:
 - Spicy foods
 - Food and drinks that are high in acid (citrus fruits and drinks, tomatoes)
 - Alcohol
 - Fried and fatty foods
 - Caffeine
 - Carbonated drinks
 - Mint
 - Chocolate
- Avoid exercise or singing after a meal.
- Wait for 3-4 hours before lying down after eating or drinking.
- Raise the head of your bed by six inches.
- Begin a weight-loss program if you are overweight.
- Drink at least eight eight-ounce glasses of water per day.

Your doctor may also prescribe medication for acid reflux. Be sure to take the medication(s) as directed. In severe cases of reflux that don't get better with diet changes or medicine, the doctor may recommend surgery to keep the acid from backing up into the esophagus.

VOCAL MISUSE AND VOCAL OVERUSE

What is vocal misuse? Vocal misuse is using the voice in a way that causes it to be injured. These behaviors can lead to vocal fold lesions (bumps or calluses on the vocal folds), and in some cases can cause permanent damage to the voice. Examples of vocal misuse include:

- Yelling, screaming and hollering (including cheerleading)
- Throat clearing and coughing
- Loud talking
- Talking in noisy situations (sporting events, restaurants, bars, parties, social gatherings, industrial settings)
- Whispering
- Singing without warming up the voice or without singing training

What is vocal overuse? Vocal overuse is using the voice too much, so that it gets overly tired. This can lead to an increased risk of vocal fold injury. If your voice feels tired or gives out easily, you may be overusing your voice. Examples of vocal overuse include talking and/or singing for too long.

How can these behaviors hurt my voice? The vocal folds are made up of layers of delicate tissue. When you use your voice to make a sound, the vocal folds vibrate or come together. If they vibrate in an easy, gentle way the voice works well, but if the vocal folds come together in a hard or forceful way, they can be injured. It's like clapping your hands. If you clap them softly, you make a sound and your hands don't hurt. If you clap your hands together hard, they will start to tingle, and then hurt, and will become red and irritated. If you continue this hard clapping, you might get blisters on your hands. Yelling, screaming, throat clearing, coughing and even loud talking can all bring the vocal folds together in a hard and forceful way and can cause vocal fold injury.

Talking a lot can also hurt your vocal folds. Your vocal folds come together about 100-200 times per second when you are talking. That can add up to millions of times per day if you are talking for many hours! All that contact can cause "wear and tear" on your vocal cords. If they don't get a chance to rest and recover, they can become injured over time.

Many styles of singing bring the vocal folds together in a forceful way, too. Athletes and dancers carefully warm up their muscles to avoid injuring themselves, and they get lots of training to learn to use their bodies without injuring themselves. Singing is the "athleticism" of voice use. Warming up your voice before singing and getting training in how to sing well can help you avoid injuring your voice.

How can I avoid misusing or overusing my voice?

- Use a noise maker or gesture to gain someone's attention instead of yelling or screaming.
- Walk over to the person you want to talk to or have them come to you instead of yelling across the room or from another room.
- Use easy throat clearing.
- Avoid talking in noisy situations. If you are in a noisy situation:
 - Get close to the person you want to speak to.
 - Put an earplug in one ear so that you can monitor how loud your voice is.
- Use a microphone if you have to speak in a large room or in front of an audience or class.
- If your job or social setting requires you to use your voice a lot, give yourself "voice breaks" or times when you don't use your voice for a while to let your voice rest.
- Use a hands-free device or hold the receiver in your hand when you speak on the telephone instead of propping it between your ear and shoulder.
- Avoid speaking in stressful situations or when you are overly tense.
- Avoid whispering.

THROAT CLEARING

Throat clearing is traumatic to the vocal folds and can contribute to a vocal injury. Often people feel the need to clear the throat because of the feeling of "too much mucous" when actually the mucous is just "too thick." Increasing your intake of water should gradually improve this problem. Make sure you inform your doctor if you have any drainage from your nose or any burning sensation in your throat. Some medical conditions may also contribute to a problem with thick mucous. If your doctor recommends a medication which "thins" the mucous, drink plenty of water (6-8 glasses per day) so the medication will work properly.

Over time, throat clearing becomes habitual. The more you clear your throat, the more you will feel the need to do so. Suppressing the urge to clear your throat or clearing your throat very gently can help to break this cycle. The following strategies will help to distract you from throat clearing and therefore, eliminate habitual throat clearing:

1. Dry swallow: Swallowing your saliva closes the vocal folds and can rid them of mucous.
2. Take small sips of water.
3. Use a "silent cough or silent throat clear." Use your breath support to push air through the vocal folds. The strong airflow blows the mucous off the vocal folds.
4. Pant lightly, then swallow.
5. Hum lightly.
6. Laugh gently, then swallow.
7. Talk through the mucous. The natural vibration of the vocal folds may rid the folds of secretions.
8. Singers may try to vocalize lightly on five note scales in a comfortable range on /oo/, slide up an octave softly on /oo/, and crescendo (get louder).

Remember, the throat clear is automatic, so it will take time, awareness and practice to eliminate it. The decrease in "wear and tear" on your vocal cords will make the effort worthwhile!

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