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Taking Care of Your Voice

by Natalie J. Dahl, M.S., CCC-SLP



What do teachers, singers, sports fans, manufacturing/factory workers, salespersons, cheerleaders, and coaches all have in common? They are all at risk for vocal problems. In adults, 3% to 9% of the U.S. population experience voice disorders; they occur in 1.4% to 6.0% of children. Many of these voice disorders can be avoided by taking proper care of the voice.

There are many indicators that your voice may not be healthy. Some are more significant than others; however, if you experience any of the following signs or symptoms, consult a doctor or a speech-language pathologist.



- Voice is hoarse or raspy
- Ability to hit high notes when singing has gone away
- Voice suddenly sounds deeper
- Throat feels raw, achy, and/or strained
- Talking is difficult
- Need to repeatedly clear throat

Whether or not your voice is already healthy, it is always important to take precautions to protect your voice and keep it strong. Below are many guidelines and tips that should be followed to help ensure a healthy voice.



- 1. Stay hydrated.** Without hydration, many functions in your body, including the respiratory and vocal tract, have a difficult time working properly. It's good to eat foods high in water, like apples, bell peppers, grapes, and watermelon, but the most important thing to do is drink water. Each person's body is different and needs different amounts of water; however, the best gauge of hydration is the color of your urine. If it is clear or light yellow, you are well hydrated. If it is dark yellow, drink more water! Also, alcohol, caffeine, some medicines, and arid climates can cause dehydration. Make sure to either monitor intake or avoid these if possible.



- 2. Take "vocal naps" daily.** It is important to give your voice a break! This is especially important to do during periods of high usage. For example, if you are a teacher and use your voice all day long, take breaks from talking during recess or at lunchtime if possible.



- 3. Don't smoke.** Smoking significantly increases your risk of throat cancer. Both direct smoke inhalation and secondhand smoke cause irritation of the vocal folds.



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4. Don't abuse your voice.

When possible, avoid extremes such as screaming, yelling, talking too loudly, talking in noisy situations, prolonged whispering, excessive throat clearing, coughing, and sneezing. Hoarseness is a sign that your vocal folds are irritated, so if your throat feels dry, tired, or hoarse, stop talking or talk less. Over time, excessive use of your voice can cause damage to your vocal folds. Nodules, polyps, or cysts may develop, which can interfere with proper vocal fold function.



5. Keep throat and neck muscles relaxed.

When singing high and low notes, try not to tilt your head up or down to reach the notes. This can strain vocal muscles and limit your vocal range in the future.



6. Keep a healthy lifestyle.

Wash your hands often to prevent getting sick. Get enough sleep; physical fatigue can negatively affect the voice. Regular exercise can increase your muscle tone and promote good posture and breathing; these things are all helpful when speaking and singing.

If you think you may have a problem with your voice, consult an Ear, Nose, and Throat (ENT) doctor, or an otolaryngologist, to determine potential underlying causes. You may also consider voice therapy from a speech-language pathologist. SLPs with experience in treating voice disorders can help you improve the way you use your voice and teach you how to use it appropriately.



Resources:

"6 Vocal Hygiene Tips You Need to Know!" Prismatic Speech Services, accessed April 1, 2019, <https://prismaticspeech.com/hygiene/>

"10 Tips for a Healthy Voice," LiveScience, accessed April 1, 2019, <https://www.livescience.com/4078-10-tips-healthy-voice.html>

"Taking Care of Your Voice," NIH, accessed April 1, 2019, <https://www.nidcd.nih.gov/health/taking-care-your-voice>

"Voice Disorders," ASHA, accessed April 2, 2019, https://www.asha.org/PRPSpecificTopic.aspx?folderid=8589942600§ion=Incidence_and_Prevalence

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