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Maintaining a Healthy Voice

There are many different reasons why your voice may sound hoarse or abnormal from time to time, and some of these reasons are things that you cannot really control. An example would be catching a common cold virus that causes laryngitis. Sure, you can wash your hands frequently and try to avoid people with colds, but virtually everyone catches a cold with a bit of laryngitis now and again.

What you probably did not know is that there are steps you can take to prevent many voice problems. The following steps are helpful for anyone who wants to keep the voice healthy, but are particularly important for people who have an occupation, such as teaching, that is heavily voice-related.

Key Steps for Keeping Your Voice Healthy

- Drink plenty of water. Moisture is good for your voice. Hydration helps to keep thin secretions flowing to lubricate your vocal cords. Drink plenty (up to eight 8-ounce glasses is a good minimum target) of non-caffeinated, non-alcoholic beverages throughout the day.
- Humidify your throat. Throat lozenges, steam and saline nasal sprays are all helpful in maintaining proper lubrication of the vocal cords.
- Try not to scream or yell. These are abusive practices for your voice, and put great strain on the lining of your vocal cords.
- Avoid speaking in noisy places. Raising the voice to be heard over background noise can be damaging to vocal cords.
- Warm up your voice before heavy use. Most people know that singers warm up their voices before a performance, yet many don't realize the need to warm up the speaking voice before heavy use, such as teaching a class, preaching, or giving a speech. Warm-ups can be simple, such as gently gliding from low to high tones on different vowel sounds, doing lip trills (like the motorboat sound that kids make), or tongue trills.
- Don't smoke. In addition to being a potent risk factor for laryngeal (voice box) cancer, smoking also causes inflammation and polyps of the vocal cords that can make the voice very husky, hoarse, and weak.

- Use good breath support. Breath flow is the power for voice. Take time to fill your lungs before starting to talk, and don't wait until you are almost out of air before taking another breath to power your voice.
- Use a microphone. When giving a speech or presentation, consider using a microphone to lessen the strain on your voice.
- Listen to your voice. When your voice is complaining to you, listen to it. Know that you need to modify and decrease your voice use if you become hoarse in order to allow your vocal cords to recover. Pushing your voice when it's already hoarse can lead to significant problems.

Medications

A variety of medications can have a negative effect on the voice. These include prescription medications, over-the-counter medications, and herbal remedies. If you feel that your medication is adversely affecting your voice, consult your physician.

Vocal Cords and Dryness

Vocal cords function best when they are well lubricated, just like your automobile engine. Dehydrated vocal cords do not vibrate as efficiently as moist ones, leading to vocal difficulties. Many medications can have a drying effect; they include:

- Decongestants and remedies for nose/sinus congestion: Pseudoephedrine is a medication that is present in many over the counter and prescription cold remedies. Minimize the use of these medications as you are able.
- Antihistamines: These are present in many cold and allergy preparations. Some of the newer generation antihistamines tend to be less drying than traditional ones, and a pharmacist can guide you on this.
- Diuretics: Diuretics, commonly used to treat high blood pressure, increase fluid output from the body as urine, and can dry your mucous membranes. Do not discontinue diuretic medications without the advice of your physician.
- Other medications that can be drying: Antidepressants, medications for Parkinson's disease, and other neurological diseases.

Inflammation and Hoarseness of the Vocal Cords

Commonly prescribed inhaled steroid medications for asthma frequently cause hoarseness. The steroid and/or the carrier substances within the inhaled preparation can be irritating and can lead to a yeast infection on the vocal cords in some cases. If your physician recommends that you take an inhaled steroid medication for your asthma, make sure to follow the manufacturer's recommendations closely. You should rinse your mouth and gargle with water after you use the medication. Use a spacer if recommended. If you notice that you become hoarse while using an inhaled steroid, see your otolaryngologist. Commonly, your symptoms can be treated quite easily. If you have persistent problems

with your voice because of your inhaled steroid, see your primary care physician or pulmonologist.

Several medication classes that relax muscles can lead to vocal difficulties by making acid reflux worse. Acid reflux is a common cause of hoarseness and vocal difficulties, and the following medications may make acid reflux worse by relaxing your esophageal sphincter muscles:

- Antihypertensives (medications for high blood pressure): calcium channel blockers, beta blockers
- Muscle relaxants

Other medications and associated conditions that may affect the voice include:

- Angiotensin-converting-enzyme (ACE) inhibitors (blood pressure medication) may induce a cough or excessive throat clearing in as many as 10 percent of patients. Coughing or excessive throat clearing can contribute to vocal cord lesions.
- Oral contraceptives contain estrogen and may cause fluid retention (edema) in the vocal cords.
- Estrogen replacement therapy post-menopause may have a positive or negative effect on the voice.
- Testosterone and other androgen-like hormones: These medications deepen the voice; accordingly, women should consult with their physician carefully before starting this regimen. Permanent voice changes can occur with their use.
- An inadequate level of thyroid replacement medication in patients with hypothyroidism.
- Anticoagulants (blood thinners) may increase chances of vocal cord hemorrhage or polyp formation in response to trauma.
- Herbal medications are not harmless and should be taken with caution. Many have unknown side effects that include voice disturbance.