

8 Vocal Tips to Keep You Talkin'

Information taken from The National Center for Voice and Speech website, www.ncvs.org

Speaking loudly or over long periods of time may lead to a voice disorder.

Using your voice for extended periods of time or in a loud environment, may result in vocal fatigue. Professional voice users, like teachers or singers, are those who depend on the voice for their career. While they are at the most risk of vocal fatigue, anybody who speaks or sings frequently may notice signs of a tiring voice. Symptoms include soreness, hoarseness, or a weak and/or breathy tone. It is not unusual if you experience brief periods of any or all of these symptoms. However, if your symptoms persist for more than a week or two, you may be experiencing the effects of vocal overuse or misuse. In these situations, seek the advice and assistance of a vocal health specialist (e.g. a certified speech-language pathologist or an ear-nose and throat doctor with additional professional voice emphasis) because chronic vocal fatigue can lead to serious voice disorders. If you know you will be speaking or singing more than normal, find a vocal warm-up/cool-down exercise that works for you. Recognize the signs of vocal fatigue and seek vocal training or therapy to keep your voice performing at its full potential.

Repeatedly clearing the throat or coughing may irritate vocal fold tissues.

Do you find yourself frequently coughing or clearing your throat? Yes, they are the body's normal response when a foreign substance (like food or mucous) comes in contact with the tissues of the larynx (voice box). Unfortunately, these may be symptoms of reflux (which is not good for the voice); additionally, these simple actions can also irritate and inflame your vocal folds and the surrounding laryngeal tissues. Of course, it is important to not aspirate food or mucous into the lungs, but it is best to minimize these responses whenever possible. Sipping water, swallowing, or sucking on a throat lozenge will often reduce the urge to cough or clear your throat. If the urge persists, try using a "baby cough", which may provide just enough impetus to expel the offending substance while causing minimal irritation to your vocal folds. Persistent coughing may also be a symptom of a serious vocal health condition, so consider consulting an otolaryngologist (ear-nose and throat doctor) if the cough does not go away. Oh, and the doctor can probably help with the reflux as well.

Hoarseness or breathiness may signal a voice disorder.

It is normal for the average person to experience a "sore throat" or hoarseness from a cold or from cheering on your favorite sports team over the weekend. However, you should experience these symptoms for relatively short and

infrequent periods of time. If the symptoms do not subside to normal within the space of a week or two of easy and gentle voice use, they may be indicative of a more serious voice disorder. Seek out an otolaryngologist (ear-nose and throat doctor) or a speech-language pathologist who can identify the root causes of the symptoms. Of course, it is not necessary to assume that every scratchy or worn out voice requires the attention of a specialist. However, you will not experience.

Well-hydrated vocal folds vibrate more freely and are less prone to damage.

To produce healthy sound, your vocal folds must sustain a consistent and free vibration. For this to happen, your laryngeal tissues must be flexible, and the mucous created by your body to lubricate them must remain relatively thin and slippery. However, when you become even slightly dehydrated, laryngeal tissues become less flexible, and the mucous becomes thick and sticky. So hydration is crucial! Interestingly, you can hydrate your laryngeal system internally and externally. To hydrate from the inside, drink approximately 64-ounces of water each day. If you are a professional voice user or use your voice frequently, you may need to consume even more, especially when engaged in or preparing for heavy voice use. For the water you drink to have time to get absorbed into the bloodstream, you need to drink water several hours to a day ahead of time. External hydration comes from increasing the humidity to your laryngeal system. Some possibilities include: inhaling the steam in the shower; placing a warm, damp washcloth over your face and breathing through it; or using hot water vaporizers. Usually hydration is only an issue when you are in a dry climate; several days may be needed for your body to acclimatize if you are new to the climate.

Caffeine, alcohol, and some medications dehydrate the vocal folds, decreasing their ability to maintain vibration.

Caffeine, alcohol, and certain medications are all substances that reduce your body's hydration level. (Yes, some recent studies indicate that the dehydrating effects of caffeine may not be quite as significant as previously thought, but this topic is still under debate.) Whenever you ingest any substance that has any dehydrating effect, the amount of water you drink should be adjusted to compensate. A good rule of thumb is to drink an extra glass of water for every cup of coffee or serving of alcohol.

Stress can lead to forceful voice production and possible vocal tissue damage.

It may not be entirely intuitive that being stressed out would significantly impact your voice. However, stress often leads to excess muscle tension in your neck

and shoulders, which can understandably impact the quality of the voice. Relaxation and stress management techniques such as meditation or deep breathing exercises can significantly reduce that detrimental excess tension, allowing your voice to function as it should.

Smoking irritates the lungs, larynx, and vocal tract.

Inhaling smoke carries hot, carcinogenic particles through your mouth, throat, and larynx and into your lungs. Many of these particles can become embedded in the delicate and vulnerable tissues of the larynx (voice box). These particles will then irritate the sensitive organs of the laryngeal system. Additionally, smoking is the leading cause of laryngeal cancer. If you smoke, strongly consider quitting, particularly if you regularly rely on your voice

Frequent heartburn and/or a sour taste in your mouth may signal a type of reflux, which can lead to voice problems.

Have you ever had heartburn, sour taste, or a sore throat? Is your voice hoarse or breathy or do you sometimes have difficulty swallowing? Do you have a sensation of something in your throat or frequently clear your throat or cough? These may be signs that you are suffering from acid reflux. Reflux occurs when a muscle at the top of your esophagus either fails to close properly or spasmodically opens for some period of time. Stomach acids then flow into your esophagus and sometimes the larynx, causing them to become inflamed and irritated. What makes this disorder difficult is that the discomfort and acidic taste may have already subsided by the time you use your voice, so you may not connect the physical symptoms with the difficulties you are experiencing with your voice. And there may be times that the physical symptoms may be absent entirely, with only feelings of the need for frequency throat clearing. So if you experience any of these symptoms for any length of time, consult with an otolaryngologist (ear-nose and throat doctor). A visual examination of the larynx should indicate whether acid reflux or another voice disorder is to blame.