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VOCAL HYGIENE (11/08)

Ten Tips for a Healthy Voice

- Drink water to keep your body well hydrated, and avoid alcohol and caffeine. Your vocal cords vibrate very fast, and having a proper water balance helps keep them lubricated. Important note: Foods containing large amounts of water are excellent hydration-conscious snacks, including apples, pears, watermelon, peaches, melons, grapes, plums, bell peppers and applesauce.
- Allow yourself several "vocal naps" every day, especially during periods of extended use. For instance, teachers should avoid speaking during the breaks between classes and find quiet ways to spend the lunch hour rather than talking in a noisy staff room with colleagues.
- Don't smoke, or if you already do, quit. Smoking raises the risk of throat cancer tremendously, and inhaling smoke (even secondhand smoke) can irritate the vocal cords.
- Don't abuse or misuse your voice. Avoid yelling or screaming, and try not to talk loudly in noisy areas. If your throat feels dry or tired, or your voice is getting hoarse, reduce your voice use. The hoarseness is a warning sign that your vocal cords are irritated.
- Keep your throat and neck muscles relaxed even when singing high notes and low notes. Some singers tilt their heads up when singing high notes and down when singing low notes. "The high notes are on the ceiling and the low notes are on the floor," Rosenberg says. "Over time, you'll pay for that"—not just with strained vocal muscles but also by causing future limits on the vocal range.
- Pay attention to how you speak every day. Even performers who have good singing habits can cause damage when they speak. Many skilled singers don't continue their healthy habits when they speak.
- Don't clear your throat too often. When you clear your throat, it's like slamming your vocal cords together. Doing it too much can injure them and make you hoarse. Try a sip of water or swallow to quench the urge to clear. If you feel like you have to clear your throat a lot, get checked by a doctor for such things as acid reflux disease, or allergy and sinus conditions.
- When you're sick, spare your voice. Don't talk when you're hoarse due to a cold or infection. Listen to what your voice is telling you.
- When you have to speak publicly, to large groups or outdoors, think about using amplification to avoid straining your voice.
- Humidify your home and work areas. Remember, moist is good for the voice.

Warming up your voice

Warming up the voice is not just for singers. Think of it like stretching and loosening up before exercise. Easy, daily warm-ups for your voice:

- Do lip or tongue trills in the morning (try it in the shower or on your drive to work) to facilitate better use of airflow and breath.
- Perform gentle humming and cooing to warm up your voice in the morning.
- If you do more vocally complex warm-ups too, such as vocal scales, do the simple warm-ups first.
- Repeat these exercises throughout the day to reduce muscular tension in the neck, shoulders and jaw.
- At the end of the day, perform a cool-down of the voice with similar vocal tasks.