



**EAR, NOSE, & THROAT CENTER OF THE OZARKS**

# Caring for Your Voice

## **Introduction**

Do you take your voice for granted? Is the quality of your voice important to you? Has your voice ever sounded raspy, hoarse, or felt like it was going to “give out” on you? These voice symptoms may indicate that you are misusing your voice or that you are experiencing irritation of the voice box (larynx). Repeated overuse or misuse of your voice is often called “vocal abuse.” Vocal abuse is one of several factors that can cause significant irritation of the vocal cords and may cause your voice to have less agility, range and quality. Prolonged irritation of the voice box may even result in physical damage such as swelling, callous formation, or scarring. In some cases, non-cancerous or cancerous growths can form on the vocal cords after long periods of irritation. The following information is intended to help you become aware of good vocal health in order to avoid the factors that cause deterioration of voice quality and poor health in the throat and voice box.

## **Symptoms of Vocal Irritation**

The following symptoms signal vocal problems:

- Hoarseness
- Raspiness
- Severe dryness of the throat
- Fullness or “lump” in the throat
- Excess or excessively thick mucus in the throat
- Voice fatigue after a period of voice use
- Throat irritation or soreness
- Loss of vocal range (especially the higher notes)
- Coughing up blood
- Difficulty with swallowing

## **Causes of Vocal Irritation and Recommended Voice Care**

By identifying specific causes of voice abuse and targeting treatments at each particular cause, voice quality can be optimized. The following are the most common causes of vocal abuse and irritation:

### ***Throat Dehydration***

A healthy voice is VERY dependent on vocal cords that are kept continually moist with watery mucus. Thin, watery mucus in the throat is normal and necessary. It allows the vocal cords to slip easily past each other during voice production. Without adequate mucus, the vocal cords must work harder to produce sound which leads to inflammation or swelling of the vocal cord tissues.

In general, it is recommended that you drink at least 2 quarts (64 oz.) of plain water per day (unless advised otherwise by another physician due to heart or kidney problems). In general, generous amounts of water, fruit juice, and other decaffeinated beverages are preferred for optimal voice hygiene. Caffeinated and alcoholic beverages actually pull water out of the tissues in your voice box. Even though they are liquids, these substances can work in this manner to cause dehydration of the throat and voice box. Small amounts of caffeinated and alcoholic beverages are acceptable, but only if counteracted by added quantities of water.

Dry air can also result in dehydration. This is often encountered on airplanes, near a heating furnace, or in locations with low humidity. Consider using an air humidifier at your bedside at night if dry air is commonly encountered.

Although there is no substitution for proper intake of water, the following recipe can be used to relieve symptoms of dry throat: mix 1/2 tsp. of salt, 1/2 tsp. of baking soda, 1/2 tsp. of clear corn syrup, and 6 oz. of warmed, distilled water. Gargle quietly and gently for two minutes. Do not rinse and use as often as necessary.

### ***Laryngopharyngeal Reflux***

Reflux of stomach contents into the esophagus and throat is an extremely common condition that results in irritation and poor voice. Symptoms of this condition may include one or many of the following: throat fullness/tightness, excessive throat mucous, frequent sore throat, frequent belching, hoarseness, frequent sour contents in the mouth, or heartburn. **It is important to know that many people with this condition rarely experience heartburn.**

Most often, surges in reflux activity will take place 30-60 minutes after meals during the daytime, yet nighttime reflux can occur as well. Although reflux can be exacerbated by lying down flat after meals, it will still occur even if awake and standing or sitting upright.

Suggestions to deal with laryngopharyngeal reflux include: plan meals at least 2 hours before lying down for sleep, elevate the head of your bed at least 4-6 inches, and wear loose fitting clothing. Spicy foods, mint, chocolate, tobacco, and caffeine often make this condition worse. Excess body weight can strongly promote laryngopharyngeal reflux. If you are overweight, consulting with your primary care physician to formulate an appropriate weight loss program is advised. Medications may be prescribed by your physician that suppress stomach acid production and thereby reduce irritation to your throat and voice box.

### ***Throat clearing***

There is a correct and incorrect way to clear your throat. When done incorrectly, a person produces a sound like a car trying to start and not catching. This bangs the vocal cords together and causes irritation. Clearing your throat correctly keeps the vocal cords from colliding.

Tips on throat clearing:

First, become aware. Ask someone to help you. Pick a time during the day when they can point out every time you clear your throat.

If you feel the urge to clear your throat, try these behaviors instead:

- Take a drink of water and don't speak for a few seconds
- Swallow HARD
- Sniff, then swallow hard
- Yawn to relax your throat
- Do a "silent cough." Inhale deeply then exhale with a strong "H."
- If you MUST clear your throat, clear quietly and gently.

It may help to start small. Choose one hour each day and do not clear your throat during that hour. Each day, add some minutes to that hour. The more you clear your throat, the more you will feel the need to clear your throat. The less you clear your throat, the less you will feel the need to clear your throat.

Conditions that affect the nose, throat, and lungs such as chronic bronchitis/COPD, asthma, allergies, chronic rhinitis/sinusitis, and laryngopharyngeal reflux may have the potential to result in throat mucous that is excessive in thickness or quantity. Proper treatment of these conditions may be needed to alleviate excess wear on the voice box related to throat clearing.

### ***Voice Strain***

Talking too loudly, for too long, or when you are tired can strain your voice. If you experience vocal strain, limit the use of your voice and sharply reduce any excessive demands such as singing, long conversations, or shouting.

- Do not force your voice or whisper. Forcing your voice and whispering places more tension on your vocal cords.
- Avoid excessive speech in noisy environments.
- Speak at the same tone you say "umm-hmm."
- Don't do all the talking!!
- Lower your pitch slightly if you sing.
- Try not to raise your voice volume or pitch when you get excited.
- Don't shout across a room or talk over loud background noise. Move closer to your listener when speaking.

- Properly address hearing loss (if possible) as this can result in excessively loud volume of speech.
- Practice relaxation techniques and deep breathing.
- If needed, learn to use your voice more efficiently with less stress by having regular sessions with a speech therapist.

### ***Smoking***

Cancer-causing chemicals and tar in tobacco cause inflammation of the vocal cords and dry out the vocal area. **It is not realistic to expect a good voice if you smoke.** The lining tissue of the vocal cords eventually thickens and swells, and a lesion or growth may form. If you smoke, stop. Research shows that most people who develop cancer of the throat have a history of smoking.

### ***Drinking***

Alcohol irritates the swallowing system and robs the throat of its much needed water content. Caffeinated coffee, tea or soft drinks also dehydrate the throat. Minimize alcohol and caffeinated beverages for optimal vocal cord health.

### ***Medications***

Certain common medications can have effects on the throat and voice. These include antihistamine medications for allergies, diuretics (water pills), and progesterone-dominant contraceptive pills—among others. Anesthetic throat sprays can also adversely affect vocal performance (like playing the piano wearing gloves).

### ***Polluted Air***

Avoid prolonged exposure to polluted air. Environments with excessive dust, mold, and/or chemical elements can adversely affect the health of the throat and voice box. Consider use of a facemask when performing tasks such as yard work, woodshop tasks, house cleaning, etc. A high quality air purifier/filter might be helpful in certain circumstances.

### ***Infection***

The voice box can be involved with viral, bacterial, and fungal infections. Most cases of “laryngitis” are viral infections that also affect other parts of the upper respiratory tract (nose, throat, wind pipe). Viral infections usually last anywhere from 5-10 days and will not respond to antibiotics. The best policy to deal with viral laryngitis is to rest the voice, to assure good hydration (warm liquids), and to be patient. Vigilant hand-washing and appropriate usage of antiseptic hand cleansing lotions is key in preventing viral infections. Fungal infections of the voice box may be particularly common in persons with diabetes or when steroid inhaler medications and/or antibiotic medications have been used over an extended period of time.

## **Surgical Therapy**

Usually, a lesion forms on the vocal cords after months or years of vocal irritation. Most lesions occur from a combination of a recent event, such as respiratory infection, and a chronic condition irritating the voice box. An example of this is continuation of singing

when you have viral laryngitis. Most conditions affecting the vocal cords improve over time with good vocal hygiene and removal of irritation. However, permanent lesions or growths may require surgical removal. Although surgery often results in voice improvement, it will always temporarily interfere with the normal function of the voice box. Recovery of voice after surgery requires time and rest. Some people continue to have problems with hoarseness, irritation, scarring, or re-growth of abnormal lesions following surgery.

## **Conclusion**

The best way to treat vocal irritation is to prevent it. Pay close attention to the care of your voice and maintain good vocal hygiene before significant physical damage to the voice box occurs. By recognizing the earliest symptoms of vocal irritation and by caring for your voice, you may avoid or eliminate voice problems.