

Vocal Hygiene

Guidelines for the professional voice user

Compiled by Brad Gibson

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The definition of Vocal Hygiene:

*"The use and care of the human voice
required to keep it healthy"*

Professional Voice User:

*"anyone who needs their voice in order to carry out
their job . . . often their voice use is more extensive
and strenuous than that of non-professional voice
users"*

Don't smoke. Smoking cigarettes, pipes, cigars and other substances can seriously harm your overall health, and damage the entire respiratory system including the upper airway, throat, mouth and nose. The heat and inhaled chemicals cause inflammation, swelling, sometimes irreversible damage, and cancer. The only way to counter the effects of smoking is to stop.

Vocal fold mucosa likes to be cool and wet and pure.
Cigarettes are hot and dry and toxic.
Marijuana is hotter, drier, and more toxic.
Anything you snort or inhale is very toxic.
We didn't really have to tell you that, did we?

Drink lots of water. The entire voice producing mechanism (mouth, throat, vocal folds and lungs, too) needs moisture to work efficiently. Sometimes, when people are not in the habit of drinking water, they don't even realize that they are thirsty until after they begin drinking.

Drink 8-10 glasses of water per day.

- Luckily, water is anything that isn't caffeinated or alcoholic.
- Diuretics like caffeine and alcohol (even chocolate) can dehydrate you so if you drink caffeinated or alcoholic beverages, increase your water to compensate.
- Milk and sugared products should not be considered as water if they create thickened secretions (make you feel phlegmy) and cause throat-clearing.
- Drink more if your physical demands require more, such as athletic endeavors on hot days or prolonged singing.

Confused?

Here are two hints for ensuring that you're well hydrated:

1. Pee Pale - your urine should be clear or very pale. Certain medications and vitamins will cause a yellow tint to urine. Urine may be more concentrated and darker first thing in the morning. Other than that, your urine should be very pale and lacking in odor.
2. You should never have a desire to clear your throat. If you constantly feel "phlegmy" or "gooky," it may be because your secretions are thickened due to dehydration. Thickened secretions make it harder for vocal folds to vibrate. Throat-clearing is very abusive to vocal folds. Get more water.

Eliminate habitual and frequent throat clearing.

We all must clear our throats on occasion, but recognize that when you clear your throat you are "slamming" the vocal folds together **hard**. This can damage the vocal folds by causing inflammation and localized irritation. Also the percussion of the vocal folds will create more phlegm.

When you feel the need to clear your throat, try to sip some water first.

If that does not work try the two following "safe" throat clearing methods:

Silent throat clear:

- closing your mouth and saying the "h" sound (as in "hello"), followed by a swallow. That sound should be silent because it is just air being blown between your vocal folds.
- "Camille" or "Miss Piggy" throat clearing - "Ahem"

Control and limit vocal loudness.

Do not speak louder than the situation or environment demands. During times when your profession demands extended vocal use (rehearsal/production) take care when in other venues/situations. Outside of professional use, don't "compete vocally". Avoid yelling, loud cheering, speaking over loud noises. Don't try to "out talk" others by increasing loudness

Be aware of your environment:

Be conscious and make the necessary adjustments.

Rehearsal halls are often converted spaces or old spaces, they can be dry, dusty and sometimes toxic – provide yourself with adequate hydration and protection.

Beware of paint fumes and off-gassing from stage shops and freshly painted sets.

Be aware of sources of second hand smoke.

Be conscious of noisy spaces: screaming over the band in a bar or yelling advice to a referee at a hockey game can cause trauma to the vocal folds and are not good for anyone. A single, strong scream can be enough to damage the vocal fold tissue in a way that can be hard to fix later. So, unless danger is involved, out and out screaming is out.

The more you know about your voice and how it works, the safer you are.

The more you understand the individual characteristics of your OWN voice, the safer you are.

Use earplugs to protect your voice? Absolutely.

When you are speaking or singing around noise, there is a strong urge to push your voice so you can hear yourself. Ear-plugs allow you to better hear your own voice so don't feel the need to push over the background noise. It is a simple but amazingly effective thing to do.

Not all earplugs are created equal so you have some choice, depending on what you need them to do and how much money you have to spend.

Two Suggestions are:

1. Drugstore variety are cheap, easy to find and good for noisy speaking situations like bars and restaurants. You put the earplug in one ear. As you hear your own voice better, you won't shout over the noise - simple but remarkably effective. However these earplugs were designed to protect your hearing, not to help you hear through noise.

2. Re-usable musicians' earplugs are specifically designed to allow you to hear well in noisy places. Because they filter out all pitches equally, you simply hear a quieter version of what is happening. They don't distort the sound so they can be used when performing or talking in loud situations; you can actually hear better with them than without them. You can buy reusable musicians' earplugs for usually less than \$20, and will last for months with regular use.

Humidify the environment. Make sure that there is enough humidity in your environment. Use a humidifier, especially in the bedroom. At night when you sleep, you may breathe through your mouth more and swallow less than during the day, both of which will increase dryness.

Individual steam inhalers can be helpful for vocal fatigue.

