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**VOCAL HYGIENE PROTOCOL**  
**(Tips for Staying Vocally Healthy)**  
**“Be Mindful of Maintaining a Healthy Voice”**

Vocal hygiene is essential to both healing of the vocal folds as well as maintaining healthy tissue and optimal vocal fold vibration. By avoiding vocal misuse/abuse (phonotrauma) and complying with good vocal behaviors, you can actively help in achieving your optimal voice production and recovery from injury.

**THROAT CLEARING:**

Excessive mucus can be a problem giving the feeling of phlegm in the throat and is associated with postnasal drip, sinus problems and allergies. Many times, throat clearing becomes a habit rather than a need and becomes traumatic to the vocal fold tissue. Some patients clear the throat to try and obtain a clearer voice. Both throat clearing and coughing are harmful as they produce forceful closure of the vocal folds.

- Dry hard swallow. Swallowing closes the vocal folds and can help rid them of mucus. It can also relax the larynx (voice box) and help alleviate the perceived need to clear the throat.
- Take small sips of water and swallow hard.
- Use a “silent cough.” The strong airflow blows the mucus off the vocal folds.
- Use a “chipmunk cough” by puffing out the cheeks and letting the airflow out at the lips.
- Pant, hum, or laugh lightly, then swallow.
- Talk through the mucus and then swallow. The natural vibration of the vocal folds may rid them of any secretions.
- For singers, vocalize lightly on five-note scales in a comfortable range on “ah” or slide up an octave softly on “ah” and increase the volume as you go.
- If throat clearing is excessive, actively monitor the number of throat clears per day.
- Drink a lot of water which thins the mucus and helps eliminate the need for throat clearing.
- Alert those closest to you to remind you to swallow when they hear you clear your throat as throat clearing may be noted by others and unknown to you secondary to the habituated pattern.



### **COUGHING:**

Chronic cough has physical side effects of vocal fold trauma and can have an impact on one's quality of life. Medical evaluation is necessary as cough can be the result of an underlying medical condition. Refractory or idiopathic cough may respond to cough control techniques and vocal hygiene to reduce the cough reflex sensitivity.

- The above strategies for elimination of throat clearing also apply to the control of a cough.
- Hydration strategies can be systemic or surface hydration by inhaling steam with a commercial facial steam inhaler.
- Suck on non-medicated or menthol free throat lozenges to increase frequency of swallowing.
- Stop smoking as this is an irritant to the laryngeal mechanism.
- Reduce or eliminate caffeine and alcohol consumption as these are known to have dehydrating and irritating effects on the larynx.
- Follow behavioral and dietary lifestyle strategies for reflux.
- Practice relax throat breathing by gently sniffing in the nose and blowing out through pursed lips.
- Identify triggers (physical or emotional) and substitute relaxed breathing and/or cognitive control.
- If vocal quality is affected secondary to chronic cough, voice therapy is recommended.

### **YELLING / SCREAMING OR LOUD TALKING:**

Some individuals use yelling/screaming or loud talking as an expression of anger, frustration, elation, or joy. Save your voice and instead:

- Talk face-to-face, at arm's length distance from the person.
- Reduce overall vocal use, especially loud talking during times of illness or upper respiratory infection as the vocal folds are susceptible to greater injury.
- Educate friends and family members about the harmful effects of yelling or screaming.
- Engage the help of others for monitoring.
- Use facial and other physical gestures to express emotions.
- Keep verbal responses short when being an active listener.
- Allow the voice to recover after prolonged vocal use, especially after periods of elevated loudness.
- Use hissing as another non-voiced outlet to express anger or frustration.
- Cultivate the dramatic power of soft, articulated speech, which is often more effective than yelling.
- Avoid yelling at sporting events, either as participant or spectator.
- Avoid yelling from room to room in the house or across the yard or street.
- Use a whistle or bell to get someone's attention.
- Use amplification when necessary, especially in meetings, teaching or large auditoriums.

**WHISPERING:**

Whispering is not recommended as studies have shown the airflow through the laryngeal area can vary. In order to be heard laryngeal tension increases and is forced.

**GRUNTING / NOISY VOICING:**

Grunting when lifting or exercising creates forceful, traumatic closure of the vocal folds. Instead, exhale slowly on exertion phase of any exercise (preferred), or close the vocal folds gently prior to initiating each exercise event (such as a sit-up or weight lift).

**NOISY ENVIRONMENTS:**

In an environment that is inherently noisy (cars, buses, trains, airplanes, restaurants, social gathers, night clubs). Avoid speaking over competing background noises for long periods of time as this requires maximum effort from the vocal folds. Alternatives include:

- Face the listener when engaged in conversation.
- Gently over-articulating rather than increasing loudness.
- Slow the speaking rate to avoid the need for repetition.
- Speak at a normal pitch. There is a tendency to raise pitch and loudness in background noise. A normal or slightly lower pitch often cuts through noise, naturally decreasing the need to increase loudness.
- If able, take control of your environmental competing noise by lowering or eliminating noise from the radio, television, etc. when talking.
- Find an area in the environment with the least amount of competing noise while speaking or move into a location with less or no noise when engaged in longer conversation.

**EXCESSIVE TALKING:**

Talkative individuals find this is a difficult habit to break. Try the following:

- Schedule vocal "naps." Observe 20 minutes of silence, two to three times per day or 10-15 minutes per hour (preferred). Wear an alarm watch or set you alarm on the phone as a reminder to schedule vocal naps or plan them on the hour or half-hour.
- Set your phone or watch to help remind you to keep check on your voice throughout the day and evaluate vocal use and vocal behaviors. Visual reminders are also helpful.
- Limit the amount of time on the telephone. When using the telephone, make sure that your head remains in an upright, centered position to insure proper respiratory support. Use texting or electronic mail more and the phone less.
- Be a good listener and be conscious of interrupting others in conversation.

**CAFFEINE CONSUMPTION:**

Excessive caffeine intake has a diuretic effect and depletes tissue of needed hydration, especially the true vocal folds.

- Avoid caffeinated beverages (coffee, soda, tea, chocolate) before heavy voice use, dress rehearsals, performances, presentations, lectures, trials, sermons, or teaching.
- Switch to decaffeinated beverages (water and herbal teas are good substitutes).
- Drink a glass of water for every cup of coffee or soda.

### **Systemic Dryness and Importance of Hydration:**

Systemic hydration is necessary for the three subsystems of voice (respiration, phonation and resonance) to work efficiently without effort to produce voice. The vocal folds vibrate with the least amount of effort when systemically hydrated. A well hydrated system helps thin mucus secretions in the throat and at the level of the vocal folds to help protect the vocal folds from injury, and also help to reverse existing injury.

- For adults, drink 2 liters of water daily (“pee pale” during waking hours)
- Drink water with meals.
- Sip water frequently throughout the day.
- If water is not your choice beverage, try bottles of spring water or purified water with a twist of lemon/orange or slice of cucumber for flavor.
- Limit or avoid caffeine and alcohol beverages (tea, coffee, chocolate or soft drinks) as these are drying agents.
- Avoid recreational drug use.
- Do not smoke and avoid secondary exposure to smoke.
- Avoid drying medications such as antihistamines, decongestants, and diuretics as possible. Do not stop any medications but discuss with your physician whether medications are irritating or dehydrating to the vocal folds. If medication has a drying effect, it is most important to drink water to help moisturize the system.
- Use a facial steam inhaler for direct moisturization of the tissue of the larynx and vocal folds to help with excessive dryness or thick secretions in the throat.
- Use a portable room humidifier if the environment where you work, live, travel, etc is dry.

### **REST / SLEEP PATTERNS:**

General body fatigue is reflected in the voice. Optimal vocal efficiency may not be achieved when you are tired. “A tired body is a tired voice.”

- Get more rest prior to heavy voice use (recommended is 8 hours/per night)
- Awareness of getting plenty of rest is particularly important when traveling.
- Allow time for a short nap/rest prior to important speaking commitments whenever possible.

### **STRESS MANAGEMENT:**

Stress/tension can manifest in the voice and total body. To help prevent and/or manage stress:

- Exercise regularly.
- Be mindful of stress triggers.
- Eat a balanced diet.
- Maintain good overall health and get yearly physicals.
- Talk and move more slowly. When you move slowly, you tend to talk slower. You control the pace of the situation.
- Verbalize your feelings.
- Make sure that you attend to your own personal needs.
- Seek professional support when appropriate.