

# HOARSENESS

The larynx (voice box) is a very sensitive organ and any alteration in the shape, position, mobility or surface of the vocal cords can result in hoarseness. Hoarseness, if severe enough, can significantly affect our ability to communicate with others and can cause a serious decline in our quality of life. Even mild changes can have a great impact, especially in professional voice users such as singers, actors, voice talent, performers and the like.

We tend to take our voices for granted and expect our voice to always be clear on demand. Like any other body part, however, the larynx is a collection of muscles, tendons, joints and nerves. If we use them improperly or use them too much, they will give out. One need look no further than the world of sports to understand that the body can only take so much abuse.

**Do not abuse or misuse your voice: Your voice is not indestructible.** In every day communication, be sure to avoid habitual yelling, screaming, or cheering. Try not to talk loudly in locations with significant background noise or noisy environments. Be aware of your background noise—when it becomes noisy, significant increases in voice volume occur naturally, causing harm to your voice. If you feel like your throat is dry, tired, or your voice is becoming hoarse, it may help to minimize talking.

Try not to speak in an unnatural pitch. Adopting an extremely low pitch or high pitch can cause an injury to the vocal cords with subsequent hoarseness and a variety of problems. Whispering uses the muscles and joints of the voice box in an unnatural manner and can lead to further injury. **It is better to speak softly than to whisper.**

**Minimize throat clearing:** Clearing your throat can be compared to slapping or slamming the vocal cords together. Consequently, excessive throat clearing can cause vocal cord injury and subsequent hoarseness. An alternative to voice clearing is taking a small sip of water or simply swallowing to clear the secretions from the throat and alleviate the need for throat clearing or coughing. The most common reason for excessive throat clearing is an unrecognized medical condition causing one to clear their throat too much. Common causes of chronic throat clearing include gastroesophageal reflux, laryngopharyngeal reflux disease, sinus and/or allergic disease.

**Drink water (stay well hydrated):** Keeping your body well hydrated by drinking plenty of water each day (6-8 glasses) is essential to maintaining a healthy voice. The vocal cords vibrate extremely fast even with the simplest sound production; remaining hydrated through water consumption optimizes the throat's mucus production, aiding vocal cord lubrication. To maintain sufficient hydration, avoid or moderate substances that cause dehydration. These include alcohol and caffeinated beverages (coffee, tea, soda). Also avoid medications that can cause thickening of the mucous such as antihistamines (Claritin, Allegra, Zyrtec, Benadryl, etc...) and decongestants (Sudafed, pseudoephedrine, phenylephrine...).

**Do not smoke:** It is well known that smoking leads to lung or throat cancer. Primary and secondhand smoke that is breathed in passes by the vocal cords causing significant irritation and swelling of the vocal cords. This will permanently change voice quality, nature, and capabilities.

**Moderate voice use when sick:** Reduce your vocal demands as much as possible when your voice is hoarse due to excessive use or an upper respiratory infection (cold). Singers should exhibit extra caution if one's speaking voice is hoarse because permanent and serious injury to the vocal cords are more likely when the vocal cords are swollen or irritated. It is important to "listen to what your voice is telling you."

Your voice is an extremely valuable resource and is the most commonly used form of communication. Our voices are invaluable for both our social interaction as well as for most people's occupation. Proper care and use of your voice will give you the best chance for having a healthy voice for your entire lifetime.