

Spotting voice problems early

The voice is our main form of communication, though very few people apart from singers and actors, receive training or have an awareness of the proper care and maintenance of this most precious commodity. Teachers are professional voice users and probably place more strain on the vocal mechanism than other professionals. Yet they are rarely given training in this area and are likely to be unequipped to spot problems early in their pupils – or even themselves. **Vocal health**, including practical work, should be on the syllabus at every teacher training college and should be included in education authorities' programming.

Signs of trouble

Despite the lack of training, there is significant concern within the teaching profession about vocal health. Everyone knows about the music teacher who loses his voice before the Christmas production. Most teachers don't stop work to rest the voice, and go on regardless in an effort to satisfy the demands of the job. With time, this type of vocal abuse will exact a price.

Constant abuse of the voice can result in a loss of range, hoarseness, soreness or a lack of resonance!

Sounds familiar?

These symptoms may go away during the holiday times and then reappear during term-time. Laryngitis or hoarseness is often pain-free so teachers soldier on and the problem is still there. People must be warned that to **misuse your voice for long enough can result in the permanent loss of voice**. This can be an isolating & debilitating experience and need not occur if the signs of danger are spotted early.

The following are signs to look out for:

- **Persistent hoarseness**
- **Loss of range and/or volume**
- **Pain in the neck or throat**
- **Recurring loss of voice**

The college student's story

"When I was in University, I was an enthusiastic student who wanted to participate in as many activities as possible. I was in the opera production, singing in opera workshops, practicing, having lessons and attending lectures and studying – but I now shudder to think that I also sang in concert and chamber choirs as well as appearing regularly with a folk-rock band! Nobody suggested I was doing too much or even enquired about my vocal activities, and I got into vocal trouble.

The first sign was when I **began to need extra muscular force** in order to make a sound. I lived with this for a while and gradually my range began to go, especially the upper register. I went to a laryngologist who identified a **nodule on the vocal cord**. This was explained to me as a sort of blister – before you get a callus. I was told to stop singing and speaking for at least 3 months and warned that if I did not do this the nodule would not go away. I followed the instructions meticulously, did not speak on the phone, carried a notepad with me, took cool mist inhalation treatments, drank lots of water and took medication for the swelling.

After this difficult and isolating period, I gradually resumed my vocal activities with a new routine in vocal care involving silent periods when I felt stressed. I stopped singing in the band where I was not using my technique properly. That was all 20 years ago and I have since enjoyed a professional singing and teacher career.”

The teacher’s story

“I am an experienced primary school teacher and eventually found my way into teaching for the deaf where I have been happy the last 20 years. My problem began 4 years ago when I became ill after Easter with a viral infection which resulted in the loss of my voice! I went to see my GP who put me on antibiotics.

After some time, it didn’t get any better and I went back to my GP who suggested I rest my voice and visit a consultant, which I did. He told me my cords were inflamed and recommended **complete vocal rest** and referred me to a speech therapist. The therapist helped me to become more aware that I was in fact **forcing my voice when I spoke**. This, along with the illness, had created quite a serious vocal problem.

I was given some exercises on how to **relax, breathe deeply and use my resonances e.g. humming**. I returned to work in September and took care to rest my voice at the end of each teaching day. My voice now sounds healthy, vibrant and expressive. Good vocal training at the beginning of my career would not have prevented the illness but would have speeded my recovery.”

What Helen suggests

- Drink plenty of water (NOT tea or coffee) – at least 2 litres a day. I know of one enlightened head teacher who has water glasses on every desk and insists on ‘drink times’ throughout the day!
- Enjoy quiet – if you teach, find a new strategy to get the attention of the pupils without using your voice. Establish quiet times in the classroom
- Try not to shout. If available, use a microphone or megaphone. This will ease the strain
- Do not over-do it if you are ill. *Take time off!*
- Humidify the classroom. Central heating and air conditioning are very drying on the voice. Try wet towels on radiators, gold fish bowls (*without the fish*) or a humidifying machine
- Ventilate the room well
- Do not smoke or allow anyone else to smoke near you

- Do not use cold remedies as they can have a drying effect on the voice
- Keep fit – swimming, yoga and Pilates are especially good for the breathing mechanism
- Avoid pubs, parties and noisy gatherings until the symptoms disappear
- Inhale steam at least 2 – 3 times per day if you are having vocal problems, otherwise it is good to do anyway once or twice a week. Try ‘Dr Nelson’s inhaler’ (available from John Bell & Croydon, Wigmore St)
- If problems still persist, see your GP and ask to be referred to a laryngologist.

Essential exercises for good vocal maintenance

1. Stretch & yawn
2. Reach up to the ceiling, then bend over keeping knees bent and letting the air out
3. Place your hand on your tummy and be aware of the action there to control breathing (the tummy expands on inhalation and contracts on exhalation)
4. With this awareness, inhale and hum on exhalation. Try ‘shhhh’ or ‘zzzzz’
5. Sing on the vowels and do not over-emphasize the consonants. Singing in other languages can help bring this to your awareness.

Summary

The voice is your most precious resource ever. It should not be taken for granted and must be cared for and nurtured. More access to vocal skills and knowledge needs to be developed and provided.

Everyone can benefit from vocal training to ensure a long and healthy professional life.

For any more information on vocal health and well-being, contact Helen below.