



How to look after your voice

The voice is our main form of communication, though very few people apart from singers and actors, receive any training. There is also a lack of awareness about the proper care and maintenance of this most precious commodity. Your voice.

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. Unfortunately, they are unlikely to be equipped to spot problems early. Vocal health, including practical work, should be on the syllabus at every teacher training college. It should also be included in education authorities' programming.

Signs of trouble

There is significant concern within the teaching profession about vocal health. Everyone knows about the music teacher who loses their voice before the Christmas concert. 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 results in loss of range, hoarseness, soreness and a lack of resonance!

These symptoms may go away during the holiday but reappear during term-time. Laryngitis or hoarseness is often pain-free so teachers soldier on. The issue though is still there. Be warned that to misuse your voice for long periods can result in the permanent loss of voice. This can be isolating and debilitating. The good news is that it can be prevented.

Here's what to look out for:

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

Case scenario: the student's story

"When I was at 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, having lessons and attending lectures and studying. I now shudder to think that I also sang in concerts and chamber choirs as well. I also appeared regularly with a folk-rock band! Nobody suggested I was doing too much or even enquired about my vocal activities, and I got into serious 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 a vocal cord. This was explained to me as a sort of blister. A nodule turns into a callus. I was told to stop singing and speaking for at least three months. I was warned that if I did not do this, the nodule would not go away. I followed the instructions meticulously. I 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 as I was not using my technique properly. That was all 20 years ago. I have since enjoyed a professional singing and teacher career."

Case scenario: the teacher's story

"I am an experienced primary school teacher and eventually found my way into teaching for the deaf. I have been happy the last 20 years. However, my problem began four years ago when I became ill with a viral infection. The result was I lost my voice! I went to see my GP who put me on antibiotics.

After some time, it didn't improve so I went back to my GP. He suggested I rest my voice and visit a consultant, which I did. The consultant told me my cords were inflamed and recommended **complete vocal rest**. He also referred me to a speech therapist. The therapist helped me to become aware that I was forcing my voice when I spoke. Along with the illness, this had created a serious vocal problem.

I was given exercises on how to relax, breathe deeply and use my resonances e.g. humming. I returned to work in 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 have speeded my recovery."

What Helen suggests:

- Enjoy quiet times. Find a new strategy to get the attention of others without using your voice. Try clapping, blowing a whistle, or tapping a teaspoon against a cup
- Drink at least 2 litres of water every day
- Avoid shouting; if possible, use a microphone or megaphone
- If you are unwell, take time off
- Humidify the classroom or rehearsal space. Central heating and air conditioning are drying on the voice.

- Ventilate the room well
- Do not smoke or allow anyone to smoke near you
- Over-the-counter cold remedies can have a drying effect on the voice. You may need to increase your intake of water or fresh juices
- Swimming, yoga and Pilates are especially good for your breathing mechanism
- Avoid noisy gatherings
- Inhale steam twice a day for no less than 5 minutes
- If vocal problems persist, see your GP and ask for a referral to a laryngologist

Exercises for good maintenance

- Before using your voice stretch and yawn
- Reach up to the ceiling then bend over keeping your knees bent and letting the air out
- Place your hand on your tummy and be aware of the action to control your breathing; the tummy expands on inhalation and contracts on exhalation
- Inhale and hum on the exhalation; try 'shhhh' or 'zzzzz'
- Do not over-emphasize consonants. Singing in other languages can help bring this to your awareness.

Summary

Your voice is precious. It must be cared for and nurtured.

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

For more information on vocal health and well-being, check out www.britishvoiceassociation.org.uk

Good luck!