

Your Voice, Your Business

I have a client who looks like Jack Nicholson and SOUNDS like Jack Nicholson. (Darn it — he is NOT Jack Nicholson!) He told me that it was a slight novelty and he even had fun one day signing a few autographs at an airport. But that's where the fun ends and the hassles start. Pseudo-Jack's gravelly voice creates more havoc than pleasure. He's hard to hear and has endured vocal challenges for a long time.

Do you take care of your voice? Have you tried to communicate all day with your patients and team and family when you've "lost" your voice?

According to the Innovation Report, a Web site for teachers, millions of workers are losing their voices due to overuse, and it's costing the economy millions of dollars. The Work Hoarse Report urges that people who use their voices a great deal at work must take care not to overstrain their vocal chords.

You are particularly vulnerable. You talk all day long "over" the hum of your dental equipment and the music in your office. Don't accept a husky voice and a dry throat as a normal hazard. You could be doing lasting damage to your voice.

Here is a checklist provided by the National Institute of Deafness and Other Communication Disorders (NIDCD) to discern whether your voice is unhealthy:

- ? Has your voice become hoarse or raspy?
- ? Have you lost your ability to hit some high notes when singing?
- ? Does your voice suddenly sound deeper?
- ? Does your throat often feel raw, achy, or strained?
- ? Has it become an effort to talk?
- ? Do you find yourself repeatedly clearing your throat?

Here are some great strategies, suggested by the NIDCD, on how to protect one of your most valuable speaking tools, your voice:

* **Hydrate your vocal chords.** Drink room temperature liquids to ensure your throat is well-lubricated and doesn't become dry. Six to eight glasses a day is recommended. (Those proverbial glasses of water keep showing up on every list — whether we're trying to lose weight or enhance our skin or save our voices!)

* **Be very aware of your posture.** Stand up straight and look forward so you don't have to strain your voice from an awkward position. This is a true challenge in the dental profession.

* **Vary the speed and tone of your speech.**

* **Pace yourself.** Speaking quickly can increase tension in the vocal chords.

* **Never ever shout.** Not only does it put strain on your voice, it is not a good strategy because you'll have nowhere else to go after that.

* **Avoid eating too many dairy products before giving a presentation.** Dairy products can encourage the secretion of phlegm, which interferes with the natural working of the vocal chords. Professional broadcasters are told never to drink milk before going on the air.

* **Limit your intake of drinks that include alcohol or caffeine.** These act as diuretics (substances that increase urination) and cause the body to lose water. This loss of fluid dries out the voice. Alcohol also irritates the mucous membranes that line the throat.

* **Don't smoke, and avoid second-hand smoke.** Cancer of the vocal folds is seen most often in individuals who smoke.

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* **Practice good breathing techniques when singing or talking.** It is important to support your voice with deep breaths from the diaphragm, the wall that separates your chest and abdomen. Talking from the throat, without supporting breath, puts a great strain on the voice.

* **Avoid eating spicy foods.** Spicy foods can cause stomach acid to move into the throat or esophagus (reflux).

* **Use a humidifier in your home.** This is especially important during winter or in dry climates.

* **Try not to overuse your voice.** Avoid speaking or singing when your voice is hoarse.

* **Wash your hands often to prevent colds and flu.**

* **Include plenty of whole grains, fruits, and vegetables in your diet.** These foods contain vitamins A, E, and C. They also help keep the mucus membranes that line the throat healthy.

* **Do not cradle the phone when talking.** Cradling the phone between the head and shoulder for extended periods of time can cause muscle tension in the neck.

* **Exercise regularly.** Exercise increases stamina and muscle tone. This helps provide good posture and breathing, which are necessary for proper speaking.

* **Get enough rest.** Physical fatigue has a negative effect on the voice.

* **Avoid talking in noisy places.** Trying to talk above noise causes strain on the voice.

* **Consider using a microphone when giving presentations.** In relatively static environments such as exhibit areas, classrooms, or exercise rooms, a lightweight microphone and an amplifier-speaker system can be of great help.

* **Consider voice therapy.** A speech-language pathologist who is experienced in treating voice problems can provide education on healthy use of the voice and instruction in proper voice techniques.

Your voice is your business. Good luck in maintaining its health. ■

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