

THE CENTER FOR SPEECH EXCELLENCE

THE HEALTHY VOICE

For a sound to be made, three things must be present; something to start a vibration, something that is able to vibrate, and something to amplify the vibrations so the sound is large enough to be heard by an ear. In the human voice, the breath, the vocal folds and spaces of the throat, mouth and nose supply these three components. Once the sound is produced the soft palate, tongue, and teeth shape the sounds into words. A healthy voice is as easy to produce as breathing. A healthy voice does not tire before the whole body does. It should be able to be used for long periods without fatigue provided the body is adequately rested and nourished and the individual is not emotionally stressed. It is pleasant to listen to. It is fluent and clear. There is no hoarseness or roughness. A healthy voice maintains a youthful sound. It is flexible enough to be interesting, convey meaning and emotion, and strong enough to be heard. A healthy voice is rich in tone, whether it is the bass, tenor, alto or soprano pitch range. A healthy voice fits the size and gender of the speaker. A healthy voice recovers quickly (within 3-5 days) from any upper respiratory disease. An aesthetic speaking or singing voice can be trained from a healthy voice.

The Requirements of a Healthy Voice

For a voice to remain healthy, the individual must remain in good health. The voice will reflect the state of the body and mind especially when the body and mind are under prolonged stress. Have you ever noticed the difference in someone's voice when they have stayed up past midnight? Imagine the voice of someone who is depressed or has a chronic illness. Think about the voice of someone who has had too much alcohol to drink. What does the voice sound like when someone is happy or very excited? How do you know when someone is very tense?

To maintain a healthy voice the body must be rested and well nourished but not over full. It is important that the body is well hydrated. Eight to ten glasses of water per day is very important to keep the cells functioning and the mucous membranes covering the vocal folds moist. Water is the best hydrating liquid for the voice. Other liquids such as milk, juice, or other sugar drinks thicken secretions in the mouth making it a struggle to speak clearly. It increases the need to cough or clear the throat. Diet drinks, caffeinated drinks, and alcoholic drinks are drying to the cells and to the lining of the mouth and throat.

Regular exercise helps the body stay energized by helping it breathe deeply to preserve muscle tone. Strong abdominal muscles help support a balanced posture. A well-balanced posture allows the abdominal muscles to work best for optimal breathing. Slumping in a chair or twisting the neck to hold a phone in place against the shoulder while talking reduces breath support and increases strain and tension in the sound of the voice. The voice will sound tired and weak.

Pamela H. Bashor and Associates

Speech and Hearing Building, Suite 202, 3201 Lillington Avenue, Charlotte, NC 28204, 704/375-5231

Slow, deep breathing is important to support a relaxed, flexible and healthy voice. It is important to avoid holding the breath or speaking so fast that breathing becomes rapid and shallow as if one is running. Individuals who are attempting to multitask i.e.: do two or more tasks at once, frequently set themselves up for unnecessary stress and poor breathing habits. Scientific studies have now shown that the brain is not efficient at processing two or more tasks at once with good attention. When multitasking is tried, neither task gets full concentration and efficiency is lost. It is better to concentrate on one task at a time and then switch to another task when needed so that each task gets full concentration in its turn. This pattern reduces stress and allows the body to breathe evenly. It also allows speech to be produced in phrases and the voice to be clear. The listener doesn't feel rushed and conversation is more effective.

Oral hygiene is important to maintain in order to keep the teeth and the mouth clean and healthy. The alignment of the teeth and the relationship of the tongue and jaw structure have an effect on clear speech sound production.

Emotional well being is critical for a healthy voice. Prolonged emotional stress will cause muscles to tense and this muscle tension can become a habit even after the original stresses have disappeared. Muscle tension in any part of the body radiates to other muscles and causes the body to react with imbalance and pain. Many headaches and lower back problems are due to prolonged muscle tension. Excessive muscle tension in the small muscles of the larynx will modify the quality of the voice including pitch, resonance and articulation. Sometimes tension and harshness in the sound of the voice can act as a feedback signal that a particular subject is causing emotional stress and has not been resolved. If this is noticed, it is important to analyze the stress and meditate, talk to a trusted friend or counselor, or seek professional help.

Conditions That Threaten The Health Of The Voice

Allergies and colds may effect the quality of the voice by causing swelling of the mucous membranes. If this swelling results in frequent sneezing or coughing then further irritation of the delicate vocal folds may occur. Those suffering from allergy reactions should drink plenty of water to thin secretions and hydrate the mucous membranes and follow medical advice to control the symptoms of the allergies. Those who use antihistamines must be careful to increase drinking water because of the drying effects of the antihistamines. To protect the voice, speak in a normal conversational pitch and volume but do not force it. Limit speaking as much as is practical. The use of these precautions should allow the voice to return to normal within about four days. A physician should evaluate a person whose voice continues to be hoarse for as much as two weeks.

Irritants such as strong chemicals, cigarette smoke, and alcohol will all have a detrimental effect on the quality and health of the voice. The excessively dry air in airplanes will dry out the vocal folds making them more susceptible to irritation from hard coughing, throat clearing or loud prolonged talking.