

# Voice Dysfunction

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**Voice Dysfunction** — Academics use their voices all day at work, whether with an entire class or with an individual student or colleague. An occupational injury common to teachers is voice dysfunction, damage of the vocal cords which cause loss or weakness of voice functions.

**Prevention** — Academics can prevent voice dysfunction by taking the following precautions: warm up your voice prior to teaching; do not use excessive volume; vary your teaching style so that you do not lecture for prolonged periods; and drink plenty of fluids throughout the day. The employer should provide acoustically designed workplaces which do not require over exertion of the voice cords. Lecturers and those in drama, music and physical education, in particular, are vulnerable to voice dysfunction. Workload (class size, hours of work) has an impact on this type of injury.

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**The voice** — is an incredible tool human beings use to communicate with each other. Take special care of it.

- Never whisper if you are losing your voice. The whispering effect will further damage the cords. Use a pad and write notes if you have to communicate.
  - Excessive heat and air-conditioning affect the voice by dehydrating the vocal cords. For the sake of your voice make sure your house is adequately humidified.
  - Vocal nodules on the cords (calluses) are caused by one thing and one thing only — bad vocal technique. Surgery can not cure bad technique.
  - If anyone tells you “Voice rest will solve your vocal problem,” don’t believe them! Vocal problems are caused by overuse and abuse of the vocal cords. You can rest them, but if you do not learn how to use them correctly, the problem will always return!
  - If you catch a cold and have to use your voice, do not take any decongestants. Their job is to dry up mucous no matter where it is in the body. Your vocal cords live in mucous. If you dry it all up, the voice will sound rough and scratchy.
  - Don’t clear your throat with a vengeance. Excessive throat clearing is a very bad habit. The more mucous you try to clear out the more mucous will be created to protect your vocal cords. It is a never ending battle and you can not win it. Try sipping water to move the larynx into a lowered relax position. (“Yawn sighs” also work, haaaaaaa.)
  - Smoking is the worst thing you can do to your voice.
  - Never use any cough drops with menthol in them if you are going to speak. The cooling factor in menthol will freeze the cords. You want them warm and plumped, not cold and shrunk.
  - No matter what size the mouth is, for you words to be heard in the back of the room is must be OPEN! To create the warm lower tones in the voice, the throat must be completely open and relaxed. (Think yawn again.)
  - If your voice is your livelihood, avoid situations that cause stress and excessive vocal abuse.<sup>1</sup>
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## Voice of Emotion

If the eyes are the mirror  
of the human soul, then



the voice is the barometer  
of human emotion.

For some people, stress can actually cause physical changes in the voice that can lead to damage. About 7% of the adult population are susceptible to the ravages of vocal tension, and may need professional help to recognize what they are doing to hurt their voices. Speech-language pathologists are experts in this form of stress intervention.<sup>2</sup>

## Voice Disorder Terminology

- **Aphonia:** complete loss of voice, due to physical or psychological (muscle tension) causes. This may develop suddenly or over a period of time.
- **Breathiness:** excessive air loss in the vocal tone, due to incomplete closure of the vocal folds as they vibrate. Poor vocal fold approximation can be caused by muscle tension, muscle weakness, vocal fold swelling such as nodules or polyps and other physical anomalies.
- **Dysphonia:** poor-sounding voice, due to any number of causes.
- **Laryngitis:** inflammation (swelling) of the larynx usually due to a viral or infectious illness.



Voice Disorder Terminology

• Vocal Abuse: use of vocal sounds that cause vocal strain/fatigue, voice deterioration, discomfort, and sometimes damage in the vocal structures, primarily due to excessive vocal loudness pitch, tension, or force involved in the vocal production. Common examples of vocally-abusive behaviours include: yelling, screaming, talking in noise, singing at extreme pitch or loudness levels, throat-clearing, coughing, and making unusual sounds such as imitating motor noises.

• Voice Disorder: any deviation in pitch intensity or quality of the voice, and/or discomfort in the neck, throat, or other relevant physical structures during speech, which consistently interferes with communication, adversely affects the speaker or listener, or is inappropriate for the age, sex, or perhaps the culture or class of the speaker

• Vocal Fatigue: Deterioration of the voice, or progressive discomfort in vocal structures, which progresses with use.

• Vocal Misuse: Incorrect use of muscle systems involved in speech and voice production including postural misuse and misuse in muscles of the respiratory system, larynx (voice box) tongue, jaw, face, and throat. Vocal misuse commonly leads to discomfort in any of the structures involved in speech and voice production, vocal fatigue and changes in vocal quality pitch, and/or loudness. Vocal misuse may be caused by poor vocal technique and training, communication in poor acoustic environment psychological tension or conflict, gastro-esophageal reflux and/or compensation for other physical conditions that impact on one's ability to function well. Prolonged vocal misuse can cause changes in vocal fold tissues, such as chronic swelling nodules, polyps, and other benign lesions which may resolve spontaneously when the vocal misuses are corrected.

References

1Adapted from Joni Wilson: www.joniwilsonvoice.com

2Kerrie Erle, M.C.I.Sc., Speech-Language Pathologist, President, London Speech and Language Centre: www.londonspeech.com

3Adapted from BCTF British Columbia Teachers Federation: www.bctf.ca

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VOICE HYGIENE — HOW TO GET THE BEST MILEAGE FROM YOUR VOICE

Table with 2 columns: DON'T..... and DO...... Rows list various voice hygiene tips such as 'don't clear your throat or cough habitually' and 'yawn to relax your throat; swallow slowly, drink some water; hum: concentrate on vocal resonance sensations'.

Maintain a Healthy Lifestyle and a Healthy Environment

- Don't demand more of your voice than you would the rest of your body. Instead: allow for several periods of voice rest throughout the day.
• Don't use your voice extensively or strenuously when you are sick, or when you feel tired. Instead: rest your voice with your body - it's sick too!
• Don't use your voice when it feels strained. Instead: learn to be sensitive to the first signs of vocal fatigue: hoarseness, throat tension, dryness,
• Don't ignore prolonged symptoms of vocal strain, hoarseness, throat pain, fullness, heartburn, or allergies. Instead: consult your doctor if you experience throat symptoms or voice change for more than 10 days.
• Don't expose your voice to excessive pollution and dehydrating agents: cigarettes smoke, chemical fumes, alcohol, caffeine, dry air. Instead: keep the air and your body clean and humid: drink 8-10 cups of noncaffeinated beverages daily, more if you exercise, don't drink alcohol or caffeine; maintain 30% humidity in the air. Quit smoking!