

"Preserving Your Voice: It's Your Business" by Leeny Del Seamonds

*There once was a Teller named Ben
Whose hoarse, tired voice had to mend.
A week off with REST
He knew was the BEST,
And GADZOOKS!-- he could tell once again!*

Poor Ben! He made one big mistake: he waited until he was **hoarse** before he started taking care of his voice. By the time he stopped talking--allowing his swollen, abused vocal chords to rest and heal--Ben was in danger of damaging his voice and possibly developing vocal difficulties such as vocal nodules, polyps, and chronic laryngitis. Fortunately, Ben learned that the best medicine for an abused voice is REST.

Losing your voice is no laughing matter. It is a storyteller's nightmare; but this story **can** have a happy ending, if you learn how to take care of your voice (the primary instrument used in your business) and recognize the warning signs of unhealthy phonation. (Some warning signs include dry, scratchy throat; husky, gravelly sound; excessive production and presence of mucus; persistent cough.) Don't wait until you "lose your voice" to care for it. Healthy phonation (making a voiced sound, without stress) requires an ongoing commitment from you.

NOTE: In order to make the most of your voice, you must understand that the **WHOLE** body comes into play in the support and function of the vocal sound. This includes proper body **posture, breathing** diaphragmatically (controlled, supported breathing made by the action of the diaphragm), and **relaxation** of the facial and neck muscles (especially the tongue and swallowing muscles). A speaker must be aware of **pitch** (intervals of sound tones, high to low), **dynamics** (volume of sound, loud to soft) and **range** (full extent of pitch, from highest to lowest tones, of the voice) to make his/her voice well inflected and expressive, and, more importantly, to promote a healthy larynx. Monotone speech is not only dull to the listener but can cause irritation to the larynx (and vocal chords) and can lead to vocal problems.

Winter is approaching, and with it comes freezing cold, damp weather, the "cold and flu season," dry heat and poor indoor ventilation, added holiday stress, and, in many cases, an increased use of your voice, whether in song or in speech. The following are some suggestions to prevent vocal problems (strain and hoarseness):

1) Don't take any risks when it comes to your voice! It is a delicate instrument and should be treated as such. Protect it in the winter (or damp weather), either by wearing a turtleneck shirt or a scarf. Don't yell or shout. If you must raise your voice, be extremely cautious and always support it properly (posture/relaxation/diaphragmatic breathing).

2) Drink plenty of liquids daily (8-10 glasses of room temperature water is best), and carry a water bottle with you when you know you'll be using your voice for any duration (performance, teaching, public speaking, etc.).

3) Be sure to breathe properly and take frequent breaths while speaking. Don't make the mistake of chattering on, determined to finish a sentence or put the point across--without taking those much-needed breaths!

4) To avoid stress, be sure you know your material before speaking, performing, singing, etc. Embarking upon a performance without knowing your subject well will certainly make you nervous and affect your voice adversely. Practice daily, for a short while, to be certain of your material and your technique. Using a tape recorder is excellent for learning material, as well as hearing vocal variety and patterns.

5) At the very first sign of a strained, scratchy voice--STOP TALKING!! Rest your voice by being quiet. Write notes if you must. Try not to talk on the telephone and, above all, DON'T WHISPER! Whispering places even more strain on your vocal chords than speaking with a hoarse voice. If you absolutely must speak, try to speak at a higher (or lower) pitch than your normal voice. This will help rest the strained, swollen vocal chords. Drinking warm slippery elm tea can be soothing (I recommend "Throat Coat" herbal tea by Traditional Medicinals), and use non-mentholated cough drops (menthol dries the throat and vocal chords) or plain, hard candies to keep the throat moist and lubricated.

6) Enjoy the Holiday Season--but not at the risk of losing your voice. Be sure to get adequate rest (and rest your voice!). Laughing long and hard in a social situation is good for the soul, but can be detrimental to your voice if it is "at risk." Of course, I'm not suggesting you can't enjoy a good laugh--just be aware that excessive, unsupported laughing from the throat can strain your vocal chords. A broad smile and a twinkle in your eye can also get the point across--and is healthier for your instrument!

Leeny Del Seamonds, an actor/director/storyteller, is a survivor of vocal nodules--the result of emergency intubations while in the hospital in 1989. She has studied voice and vocal therapy with Janet Tower, M.E.D., C.M.V.T., Executive Director of the McClosky Institute of Voice Therapy, Inc., Boston, MA. Leeny has taught numerous vocal workshops, publicly and privately and performs internationally.