**Practical Strategies for Minimising Voice Strain**

What is voice? The sound of your voice is produced by vibration of the vocal cords, which are two bands of smooth muscle tissue that are positioned opposite each other in the larynx. The larynx is located between the base of the tongue and the top of the trachea, which is the passageway to the lungs. How do you know when your voice is not healthy?

If you answer “yes” to the following questions, you may have a voice problem.

* 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?

If you think you have a voice problem report immediately to your PCBU / Officer. You may need to consult a doctor to determine the underlying cause. The doctor may also refer you to a speech pathologist to assist you in ways to use your voice.

What causes voice problems? Causes of voice problems can include:

* upper respiratory infections;
* inflammation caused by gastroesophageal reflux (sometimes called acid reflux, heartburn or GERD);
* vocal misuse and overuse;
* growths on the vocal folds such as vocal nodules or laryngeal papillomatosis; (<https://www.nidcd.nih.gov/health/recurrent-respiratory-papillomatosis>)
* cancer of the larynx;
* neurological diseases (such as spasmodic dysphonia); <https://www.nidcd.nih.gov/health/spasmodic-dysphonia>
* psychological trauma;

Tips to prevent voice problems:

* stay hydrated - drink plenty of water. Six to eight glasses a day is recommended;
* limit your intake of drinks that contain alcohol or caffeine, which cause the body to lose water and make the vocal cords and larynx dry. Alcohol also irritates the mucous membranes that line the throat;
* avoid or limit medications that dry out your vocal folds, including some common cold and allergy medications;
* maintain a healthy lifestyle and diet;
* don’t smoke and avoid second hand smoke. Smoke irritates the vocal folds. Also cancer of the vocal folds is seen most often in individuals who smoke;
* avoid eating spicy foods, spicy foods can cause stomach acid to move into the throat or oesophagus, causing heartburn;
* include plenty of whole grains, fruits, vegetables in your diet. These foods contain vitamin A, E and C as they also keep the mucus membranes that line the throat healthy;
* wash your hands often to prevent getting a cold or the flu;
* get enough rest, physical fatigue has a negative effect on voice;
* exercise regularly - exercise increases stamina and muscle tone. This helps provide good posture and breathing, which are necessary for proper speaking;
* if you have persistent heartburn talk to your doctor about diet changes or medications that can help reduce flare-ups;
* avoid mouthwash or gargles that contain alcohol or irritating chemicals. If you still wish to use a mouthwash that contains alcohol, limit your use to oral rinsing. If gargling is necessary, use a salt water solution;
* avoid using mouthwash to treat persistent bad breath. Halitosis (bad breath) may be the result of a problem that mouthwash cannot cure such as low grade infections in the nose, sinuses, tonsils, gums or lungs as well as from gastric acid reflux from the stomach.

**Use your voice wisely:**

* try not to overuse your voice. Avoid speaking or singing when your voice is hoarse or tired;
* rest your voice when you are sick, illness puts extra stress on your voice;
* avoid using extremes of your vocal range, such as screaming or whispering. Talking too loudly and too softly can both stress your voice;
* practice good breathing techniques when singing or talking. Support your voice with deep breaths from the chest, and don’t rely on your throat alone. Singers and speakers are often taught exercises that improve this kind of breath control. Talking from the throat, without supporting the breath, puts great strain on the voice;
* avoid cradling the phone when talking. Cradling the phone between the head and the shoulder for extended periods of time can cause muscle tension in the neck;
* consider using a microphone when appropriate. In relatively static environments such as exhibit areas, classrooms, or exercise rooms, a lightweight microphone and amplifier speaker system can be of great help;
* avoid talking in noisy places. Trying to talking above noise causes strain on the voice;
* consider voice therapy. A speech pathologist who is experienced in treating voice problems can teach you how to use your voice in a healthy way.

Reference: NIH National Institute on Deafness and other Communication Disorders (NIDCD) [www.nidcd.nih.gov/health/taking-care-your-voice](http://www.nidcd.nih.gov/health/taking-care-your-voice)