

A CHANGE A DAY KEEPS THE DOCTOR AWAY!

DAY ONE

Focus on your breathing and make sure you take a breath each time before you have to address a large group. Feel the breath on the back of your throat as you breathe through your mouth and make it part of your speech. You may not remember to do it every time, but bringing it into your awareness means you will remember some of the time, and that will increase until it becomes part of your preparation for talking.

Taking a breath gives you a valuable moment to relax the throat and settle any nerves you may have about facing people. It gives you space internally and slows down any tendency to rush. It helps give you authority!

DAY TWO

Today, focus on your hydration levels. Carry a bottle of water around with you and consciously drink from it at intervals. Aim to have drunk 1.5 litres by the end of the day. Cut down on your tea/coffee for the day. (These de-hydrate you) Notice if your mouth starts to feel dry and respond to that. Become aware when your body is asking for hydration and make a decision to act upon it.

Hydration is one key factor in voice issues, and most of us are under hydrated. Although water cannot go directly to the vocal cords (they sit at the top of the trachea), by increasing your general hydration, you give your cords a chance to remain healthy.

DAY THREE

Before you speak today, take time to warm up the voice muscles. You can use the warm up sheet (in downloads), or create your own. Stretch the facial muscles and open the throat; move your tongue around your mouth, feel each tooth with your tongue and notice the different grooves and smoothness; open and close your jaw, do this slowly and become aware of the hinges behind your ears - your jaw opens backwards; siren (use the "ng" sound in lung) and feel the sound travel through your nasal passages, become aware of the pressure you feel there and know this is warming up the vocal muscles safely and without undue pressure through the vocal folds; make the sound "brrr" and see how long your lips can vibrate, (this is directly related to the flow of breath); and relax your shoulders and release tension in your neck area. Today, really notice the difference warming up those muscles makes; you can speak for longer without tiring and the voice sounds clearer and freer.

Speaking with tense muscles not only will damage the voice over time, but it gives an aggressive edge to the voice and leaves you feeling more tired and the voice sounding fatigued.

DAY FOUR

This is the day when you re-evaluate your posture. An upright position gives a sense of someone who is confident and who has a natural presence. It says you are ready to take on a task and gives out a clear message of being a leader. Run through the posture check on the healthy tips sheet (downloads) and crucially become aware when you start to stoop or bring your chin forward. Your head rests on the top of your spine and your ears should be over your shoulders. Bop your head gently in this position and notice the freedom of movement. Throughout the day notice how other people are standing and think what you would suggest to improve their stance. Keep an open posture and see if you can avoid folding your arms when talking to people or waiting for a group to settle. One tip is to imagine a cord from the middle of your chest to the

ceiling. If this feels uncomfortable to you, look in a mirror and see the difference it makes.

Posture is a powerful message about how you see your role in the world. Poor posture affects vocal quality - a shortened sternum makes supportive breath flow difficult and therefore affects the timbre of the voice and a chin which is thrust forward brings the back of the throat over the trachea and closes off the deeper quality of the voice while also straining the larynx.

DAY FIVE

Monitor throat constriction. This is helped by the quality of your breathing which can open up the throat. You will know when your throat is constricted because it feels tight and you start to swallow more frequently and clear your throat. If you have to raise your voice, do so by using your resonance rather than straining your throat. If you feel stressed, your throat will also feel constricted. You can aid a more open throat by yawning and then noticing how that feels. As you yawn your jaw drops and you create more space across the palate and in the mouth. When you are in "performance" mode, you will automatically raise your voice and probably your pitch levels will rise. As you speak, consciously imagine your sound travelling to your ears and beyond!

Throat tightness leads to a strained, tight sounding voice. If not monitored and corrected, this can ultimately lead to more serious problems. An open sounding voice is more friendly and persuasive and gives the message that the speaker is in control which in turn creates a more conducive atmosphere.