



Special Care for Occupational and Professional Voice Users

Who is an Occupational or Professional Voice User?

An occupational or professional voice user is anyone whose voice is essential to their job. We are all accustomed to thinking of singers, actors, actresses, and broadcast personalities as professional voice users. Indeed, special or unique qualities of the voice are often the essential feature of their careers. But what about other occupational voice users?

Teachers, clergy, salespeople, courtroom attorneys, telemarketers, and receptionists are also people for whom spoken communication is an essential part of what they do, and there are countless other professions that rely heavily on the voice. In spite of this era of email and Internet communications, we can't really imagine an effective classroom, pulpit, or courtroom without voice. Can you imagine the difficulties of a physician conveying sensitive or complex information to a patient or colleague, or a business executive conducting a meeting without voice? Once you pause to consider a world without voice communications, you realize that voice is crucial to many professions.

Why is the Voice Important?

Voice is something that is often taken for granted. Many people, including many occupational voice users, don't pay attention to their voice until they develop a significant problem with it. These voice problems then have an adverse effect upon their ability to do their job. Consider, for example, a school teacher. Arguably, this is the most vocally demanding profession. Teachers are using their voices constantly, often in noisy rooms with poor acoustics. One recent 2004 research article found that 11 percent of teachers participating in the study reported a current voice problem. Non-teachers expressing voice problems comprised only 6.2 percent of the participants.

A similar ratio was evident when participants were asked about ever having a voice disorder in their lifetime. Teachers reported an incidence of 57.7 percent, while non-teachers reported a 28.8 percent incident rate. In another study, about 20 percent of teachers had missed work due to their voice, while only 4 percent of non-teachers had missed a day due a voice related ailment. It is thus very clear from the medical literature that high voice demands in the workplace can have health consequences for the individual, and productivity consequences for the employer. Research is ongoing into strategies to enhance the vocal health of individuals in professions with high voice demands.

What can be done about these issues?

As with many ailments, awareness is key. First, people must be made aware of voice-related occupations. A person may not know that they are in such a profession until a voice problem brings the issue to the forefront.

Secondly, one needs to be aware that high voice demand occupations do place you at greater risk for developing vocal difficulties, and that you have to listen to your own voice in order to recognize when you are developing problems. Do not accept hoarseness as part of the job. Be aware that there are steps you can take to help prevent voice problems. (For more information, see Maintaining a Healthy Voice Fact Sheet.)

Finally, know that proper evaluation and treatment can take care of most voice-related problems, and can set you up to succeed at even the most demanding voice-related occupation. If you listen to your voice and find that it is complaining to you, seek out your local Otolaryngologist (Ear, Nose and Throat Doctor) for an evaluation and treatment recommendations.