

Clearing your throat

This is something that we all do at times. Occasionally it is necessary to do it, and if you really do have phlegm or extra liquid in your larynx (maybe from something going down 'the wrong way') then you will need to gently clear it. But more often it is not necessary and it does not help to make our throats clear. Sometimes we can get into a habit of clearing our throats every few seconds when we talk, particularly when we are anxious. Many people habitually clear just before starting to sing. This habit is not helpful and can damage your voice.

What happens when you clear your throat?

Do it now, and listen to the noise and imagine the action that creates that noise. Feel the tension in your neck, chest, shoulders & face just before you do it; feel your vocal folds pushed tightly together just before the first puff of air goes through; feel the rough vibration in your throat; feel the 'stop start' nature of the sound, as the vocal folds are slammed together, then pushed apart, then slam together &c.

When these things happen in your throat many times a day, you are building up tension. More importantly when the vocal folds slap and grind together they can get bruised and swollen. The surfaces of the folds get small abrasions and areas of damage. Eventually the body responds as it always does to this sort of trauma, and small callous-like patches grow to protect the delicate tissues beneath – vocal nodules. It sometimes helps to think what happens if you treat a part of your body that you can see like this. If something frequently rubs on your face, the skin will get red, hot, dry, broken, sore, infected &c. Our vocal folds are also covered by a skin of mucous membrane and will react in the same way.

Why do we feel we need to clear the throat?

When we are tense or anxious, our throats tighten and we feel as if there is something there. There is not, but the sensation is very real.

Sometimes there is indeed a small bead of mucous on one of the folds, which you feel you need to clear. If you clear in the usual way, then the bead flips up onto the top surface of the vocal fold, and for a few seconds your throat feels clear. Then the mucous just slides down back to where it was, and you feel you need to clear again. And so on!

What should we do instead of throat clearing? Try some of these suggestions.

- Drinking enough water during the whole day will help the mucous not to be thick and sticky and form into beads.
- When you drink, wet your lips, the space between lips and teeth and inside cheeks.
- Maintain general voice development activities and particularly dynamic relaxation and good breathing habits.
- Relax the throat muscles by specifically relaxing shoulders, jaw and face. The relaxation will then flow into your throat.
- Expand the back of your throat into the 'pre-yawn' position and huff gently a few times.
- Do a strong 'chin tucked' swallow.
- Do 'baby' throat clearing – gentle and controlled.
- Hum a gentle 'mmmm' a few times.
- Keep your voice fit and healthy.

The more you do it, the more you will need to do it. The less you do it, the less you will need to do it.

N.B. Throat clearing can be caused by gastric juices rising from the stomach and affecting our throats, and this can happen even if you don't feel it. See your doctor if necessary.