



Improve the Sound of Your Voice!

I've been evaluating voices for many years, and the two most common problems I've encountered are "creaky" voices and voices that use an inappropriate "habitual pitch." These problems are not just unpleasant to listen to; they can interfere with successful communication. Anything that gets in the way of a message is interference, and anything that distracts a listener from understanding can cause distortion.

"Creaky voice," also called "glottal fry" and "vocal fry," can happen to anyone when he is tired or ill. However, if it's there all the time, it's a "creaky voice." The voice sounds like an idling lawn mower engine. It's caused by weak air pressure passing over the vocal cords, so we can hear it more when a speaker is at the end of an utterance and she's running out of air. But because many people who have "creaky voice" don't realize it, they're unintentionally interfering with their own communication.

How do we know if we have "creaky voice"? By consciously producing it – identifying it – and then listening to our voices to see if we're unconsciously doing it. Start by sighing "ah" while lowering your pitch to the bottom of your range. Continue sighing "ah" as long as you can, until you hear that lawn mower idling.

Once you hear and identify that sound, tape yourself reading for 5-10 minutes; then play it back and listen for that sound, especially at the end of your utterances.

If you got it, how do you get rid of it?

By fully supporting your breath stream from the beginning of an utterance to the end.

How do you fully support your breath stream?

First, stand up.

Then slowly inhale while you're bending your knees slightly.

Next, slowly exhale and count from 1-5 while straightening your knees.

This sounds easy, but synchronizing your exhalation to end strongly, right as you're saying "five," isn't easy. But by synchronizing your inhalation with knee-bending and your exhalation/speaking with knee-straightening, you're teaching your body how to support your breath stream all the way to the end of utterances. This takes practice, but it works.

Once you can support your breath stream through “five,” then count to seven, then ten, always fully supporting your breath stream to the end, without running out of breath. Then start reading passages from a book out loud, bending and unbending those knees as you inhale and exhale. The more you practice, the easier your support of breath will become, and “creaky voice” will become part of your past.

The second voice problem I hear the most is people speaking with a pitch that’s wrong for them. In the study of voice we refer to “habitual pitch,” which is the pitch we use most often in our everyday voices. Unfortunately for many of us, our habitual pitch is not the most natural, or clearest, or easiest to produce. Why then do we use habitual pitches that aren’t the best for us? For one reason, we believe that our voices should conform to some artificial norm dictated by fashion or style. For men, this may mean using a deeper, more “masculine” pitch than is natural; for women, this may mean using a higher, more “feminine” pitch, or a lower, more businesslike pitch.

The most natural, clearest and easiest pitch for us to produce, the one that causes the least vocal strain and therefore lasts the longest in extended talking, is called the “optimum pitch.” Here are three ways for you to determine your optimum pitch, so you can find the way that works best for you.

1. “Yawn-Sigh” Technique: Do just what the title says – yawn (or take a deep breath), and then sigh (usually we sigh, “ah”). The pitch of the sigh is often your optimum pitch.
2. “Swollen Tone” Technique: Put your fingers in your ears (yes, put your fingers in your ears) and sing “ah” or hum “m” up and down the scales (do-re-mi-fa-so-la-ti-do) until one of the tones “swells”(sounds the loudest, fullest and clearest). That tone is usually your optimum pitch.
3. “Uh-huh” Technique: Just say, “Uh-huh.” It’s close to an automatically- produced utterance, and it often comes close to your optimum pitch.

Now that you’re supporting your breath stream and you’ve found your optimum pitch, you’ve got to transform these new skills into habits. That will require lots of practice – reading aloud, talking to yourself, recording yourself and listening to your voice as you speak.

You’ll be swapping old, unpleasant vocal habits that once interfered with your communication success for new, pleasant vocal habits that will enhance the impact of all your messages.