Dear Alice,

I was reading your section on fear of public speaking. Every time I speak, my mouth dries up to the point that I can hardly talk, which makes me even more nervous. Is there any secret to overcome this?

Thanks, Cottonmouth

Answer
Dear Cottonmouth,

Water? Have some by your side and take a few sips all the way through your presentation, not only when the cotton's ready to harvest. Dry mouth is one of many fight-or-flight stress symptoms well-known to public speakers, and there's nothing wrong or unprofessional about rehydrating while you're "on"? politicians, entertainers, and other performers do it all the time. Sipping something through a straw might be easiest, especially if you have shaky hands, too. Constant quenching might distract the audience from your message, so pace yourself and fill up when the spotlight's not on you: when one of your attendees is asking a question, making a comment, etc. Build this break time into your presentations so that you know you'll have chances throughout your talk to drink, rest your vocal cords, take a few deep breaths, and relax a little bit.

Consider this as well: you're likely much more aware of your oral desert than anyone to whom you're addressing. Being certain that everyone can see gunk gathering in the corners of your mouth will only make the cotton grow. Unless you're having trouble getting the words out, and moving your mouth, tongue, and lips like a cow chewing her cud, no one will know or care about what's going on in there. In case your lips also get dry, some people find using a lip balm containing glycerin or another moisturizer helpful.

Preventing cottonmouth altogether comes with greater confidence in one's subject, delivery, and one's self when in front of others? and all that usually results from lots of practice. Most of us make one-time presentations, or frequent speeches, but on different topics each time. As horrifying as it may sound, if we could just keep giving the same speech over and over, we'd shed most of those public speaking symptoms in no time. If there's no chance of this happening, taking some extra time to prepare and relax before your presentation can help reduce the stress that breeds cottonmouth and company.

Alice!
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