



**SING LIKE A STAR STUDIOS**

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## **Vocal Health: How to Keep Your Voice Healthy This Winter - and All Year Long!**

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I am often asked by my students "How can I keep from getting sick, or if I do catch a cold, how can I get my voice back to normal as soon as possible?"

During the winter months, good hand washing and sanitizing are extremely important. Germs are transmitted from the hands to the mucous membranes any time you touch your eyes or your nose. Carry a portable hand sanitizer with you at all times and use it frequently throughout the day. Sneeze and cough into the crook of your arm, rather than your hands, and encourage others to do likewise, to prevent the spread of germs.

Anything that can affect your health, body, skin, or mood can affect your delicate vocal folds, which swell (this is known as edema) when traumatized. When the folds are swollen, singing becomes difficult or impossible. Singing with compromised vocal folds will further injure the tissues and should be avoided.

The most important factor in good vocal health (other than good technique) is hydration (water). The vocal folds need to remain hydrated (wet) in order to function optimally. Most people do not drink enough plain water, and singers need to drink more water than the average person in order to maintain vocal health. The motto is "pee pale". That's right, the more clearly you tinkle, the happier your vocal folds are!

You should be aware that, because of the functioning of the epiglottis, nothing you drink actually touches the vocal folds, so the old "tea and honey" remedy, while it might feel nice, does not affect the vocal folds (although it may provide a soothing effect to the tissues of the throat). The only way to affect the vocal cords is to inhale steam or mist onto them.

Humidity, steam, mist, drinking water, are hydrating and therefore good for your vocal folds; smoke, pollen, dry air, air conditioning and heating, caffeine, alcohol and drugs are dehydrating and therefore bad for them.

The following are some of the most common challenges to a singer's vocal health:

**Dairy:** Some singers find that dairy products like milk or cheese cause thick mucus, so these products should be avoided on performance days.

**Allergies** are also mucus producing, but you should avoid most antihistamines because they are too drying to the vocal folds and will make singing more difficult. If you must take them, counter their dehydrating effects with plenty of water and steam. Breathing through a warm wet towel will do in an emergency, as will inhaling steam from boiling water, or the local gym's steam room.

**Illness:** If you are sick or vocally tired, you need rest. Avoid talking or even whispering. Whispering is not a healthful solution when your vocal cords are swollen. Never talk loudly or sing when your vocal cords are swollen- you may be encouraging vocal nodules. Instead, silence, rest, and steam will get you on the road to recovery. Lip and tongue trills can be helpful once you are on the road to recovery.

Instead of singing during this time, just listen to your old voice lessons. In that way, you are training "aurally" instead of "orally".

**Caffeine and alcohol:** These substances dehydrate the vocal folds, depleting them of needed lubrication. If imbibed, you need to drink at least as much water to counteract their dehydrating effects.

**Environment:** Re-conditioned air (AC or heating) depletes the moisture from the air in the environment. Some areas of the country are much more dry than other areas. If you live in a dry climate, or you use AC and heating units, you should use a humidifier at night. Air conditioning and heating units take moisture out of the air, affecting the hydration of the cords. If possible try to avoid using forced air systems (heat or cold) while sleeping.

**Flying:** airplane air is extremely dry- avoid alcohol and caffeine and drink at least 8 oz of water per hour while flying.

**Throat Clearing and Coughing:** Both throat clearing and coughing are very hard on the vocal folds (they actually go into a kind of spasm). When you need to clear mucus because of a cold, use this method: Take in a deep breath, hold your breath a moment and then expel the air with an energetic "Silent H". Try to do anything you can to minimize trauma to the folds such as hard coughing and throat clearing.

**Antihistamines:** These are over-the counter drugs used to treat allergies and colds.

They should be avoided if possible because of their drying effects. Nasal sprays such as Nasacort, Nasonex, Flonase may relieve allergy symptoms without the drying effects of antihistamines.

**Analgesics:** Aspirin and anti-inflammatory drugs like ibuprofen may lead to bleeding and blood thinning, which may result in vocal fold hemorrhage. Tylenol is a better pain reliever for singers.

**Expectorants:** If you have to sing while sick (which is best avoided) an expectorant such as Mucinex may help to thin out thick secretions of mucus or post nasal drip. Make sure you are drinking 8 oz of water per hour all day long, or this medication will not be effective.

**Anesthetic Sprays:** Do not use over the counter (or prescribed) anesthetic sprays on the throat before singing. As a singer you need to be fully aware of what is happening in the throat while you are singing; if you numb it, you may over use it unknowingly.

**Progesterone and other hormones:** Any hormone may cause alterations to the larynx- Female body builders who use hormones to build muscle often sound like men, and never regain the use of their former voice.

**Acid Reflux:** (Laryngopharyngeal Reflux Disease)

Acid reflux is a problem many people do not even know they have. It occurs when stomach acid regurgitates up onto your esophagus, touching your vocal folds and damaging the folds and surrounding tissue.

Here is how it works: food travels down the esophagus to the stomach to be mingled with acid for digestion by passing 2 sphincters (bands of muscle fiber), one at the bottom and one at the top of the esophagus. In people suffering from acid reflux, the food/acid mixture "refluxes" or flows backward through the sphincters through the esophagus and into the throat, bathing the vocal folds with acid.

**GERD** (Gastroesophageal Reflux Disease) is a reflux of stomach acid that goes through the lower sphincter into the esophagus

**LPRD** (Laryngopharyngeal Reflux Disease) is where the stomach acid makes its way all the way through the upper sphincter through the esophagus and into the throat, causing damage to the vocal folds and pharynx. Many sufferers do not complain of heartburn, which is a result of the tissues of the esophagus becoming irritated. LPRD sufferers are affected more directly on the larynx and throat and vocal folds. Symptoms include hoarseness, coughing, constant throat clearing, pain in the throat, and a bitter taste in the mouth, particularly in the

morning. Treatments include proton pump inhibitors, dietary changes, and sleeping with the body elevated.

**Smoking:** Smoking anything is anathema to good vocal health. Not only are inhaled substances irritating to the vocal tract, inhaling cigarette or marijuana smoke will alter the vocal folds and change the voice.

## GOOD HEALTH HABITS FOR A HEALTHY VOICE

1. **Rest.** Rest and sleep are essential for singers to maintain vocal health. If you don't get enough rest and sleep the vocal folds are adversely affected, resulting in edema or swelling of the tissues. This means that, as the singer, unfortunately you must skip the "after show" party, and go straight home to bed. If you want to preserve your voice you must make rest a priority. This includes vocal rest- if you are rehearsing or performing, you need to limit the amount of time you spend speaking during the day. Think of having a limited budget. The voice unfortunately is not unlimited- you can use it safely for only a certain number of hours per day, and then you are "cashed out". If you are singing a lot or singing loudly, you have even less "cash" in reserve. Pace yourself. Use your voice as little as possible on the days when you have a performance. Give yourself a vocal rest day at least one day a week. Don't talk or sing all day. Sound difficult? So is recovering from nodule surgery!

2. **Hydration:** Drink two quarts of water per day, until you consistently "pee pale".

The vocal folds need to have some mucus on them in order to function efficiently, but we want thin rather than thick mucus. Lubrication is created in the vocal folds by drinking lots of water- at least 2 quarts per day. Dr Van Lawrence, a world-renowned "throat doctor" (ENT) has been credited with saying "Drink until you pee pale".

3. **Exercise:** Daily aerobic exercise is good for all the cells of the body including the vocal folds, and heart pumping deep breathing exercises help you stay in shape for performing.

4. **Diet:** Emphasize vegetables, fruit, and whole grains. Stay away from dairy, chocolate, and acid forming juices like orange juice, which may create phlegm.

5. **Avoid noisy environments:** Don't talk loudly in loud environments, trying to be heard over the crowd. Stay away from outdoor sporting events that encourage screaming outdoors. Don't even think about trying to be a cheerleader if you really want to sing. Screaming loudly at one event has been known to cause vocal nodules. Is it really worth it? If you must attend an outdoor sporting even or rock concert, an occasional "woo-eee" in the upper register should be ok. Do not scream or talk loudly, ever.

**5. Be aware of your speaking voice:** you should be speaking in the area of the voice where you say "MMMM-HMMMMM" as if you are enthusiastically agreeing with someone. If you have to speak for long periods of time every day, always use amplification. If you are a classroom teacher, this can save your voice!

A portable "cube amp" with a microphone plugged in can easily travel with you anywhere you need to speak to a group, or sing. These little amps pack a large punch and they are very small and easy to carry. Never raise your voice over large groups. If you direct musicals, working with large groups of excited singers, this tip could really save your voice.

**6. Protect your voice during long rehearsals:** When I attended a final dress rehearsal at the Metropolitan Opera Company in New York, most of the singers were "marking" (singing at half volumes or an octave lower), even with the hall fairly full of onlookers. The voice is a limited instrument and cannot be used at full volume for several hours per day, as other instruments can. Do not allow yourself to be required by directors to sing "full voice" at every rehearsal. This will result in a less than stellar performance at opening night. If you are in a rock band, resign yourself to the fact that you will never be able to sing louder or longer than an electric guitar.

Don't allow yourself to be tempted to push and scream during rehearsals or performances, even when the onstage volume is loud. (Which it always is, unfortunately). Protect your fragile and irreplaceable instrument by refusing to sing too long or too loud. A guitar string can be replaced, but the vocal folds cannot. If you want a long career, be smart about volume when singing, and limit the time you spend singing "full voice". Of course a singer with good technique and training will be able to sing for longer periods of time than a singer who is not balanced vocally. Be sure to warm up the voice before rehearsals, and cool down after rehearsals with some semi-occluded exercises such as lip or tongue trills.

**7. Think Like an Athlete:** An athlete warms up and cools down their muscles. A dedicated athlete knows they must exercise daily. They also know when to stop. They are disciplined about their body. When they are "in training" they avoid all harmful substances. They value and respect their body because it is the source of their income. You should do the same.

For singers "exercising" means vocalizing daily on scales and exercises that will encourage balanced registration and a good mix. You should vocalize enough each day to balance and develop the voice, but not so much that you get hoarse. Learn to pace yourself.

**8. Gargling:** Though gargling does nothing for the vocal folds, it may help to soothe the tissues of the throat. Herbal teas such as Throat Coat contain slippery elm and may also be helpful for the throat (although, again, since these

substances do not touch the vocal folds they won't minimize swelling of the folds). Avoid caffeinated beverages.

Entertainer's Secret throat spray helps to moisturize the tissues of the throat. (To order, call 800-308-7452).

#### **9. Steaming and Irrigating:**

Steam or mist, if inhaled, will hydrate the vocal folds and help minimize swelling. I encourage singers to invest in a portable facial steamer (found at any drug store) and inhale steam several times a day if you are dealing with swollen vocal folds. (Make sure you sanitize the unit daily). A larger device such as a humidifier or a vaporizer should be used while sleeping to increase hydration of the vocal folds and soothe swollen tissues.

I also recommend using a "NETI POT" to clear out sinus cavities. The use of a neti pot requires mixing up a saline solution that will be poured through the nasal passages. The neti pot used with a saline solution has been shown to be an effective treatment for hay fever, sinusitis, and other nasal conditions. Nasal irrigation is used on a daily basis by many professional singers to remedy sinus dripping.

With these good vocal health habits, you should be able to maintain your voice with confidence throughout the winter, and all year long!