

Athletes and the Arts® Keeping Your Voice Healthy

The voice professional uses more than just his or her mouth, throat, vocal cords and lungs in producing sound. Although these organs are very important in making vocal sounds, the entire body is involved in the act of producing your voice. Your body is your instrument, and maintaining it in optimal condition goes a long way towards creating beautiful music. Here are some guidelines on keeping singers healthy.

Posture and Alignment

Your voice is the product of air going through vocal cords and the oro-pharyngeal space: the air from the lungs passing through the windpipe and vocal cords, eventually reaching the changeable shape of the throat and mouth produces the many types of sounds we hear in song. Proper alignment and the least amount of tension between the windpipe, throat and mouth make your exhaled air travel more efficiently—this helps you produce vocalized sounds with the least possible tension and stress. Exercises that focus on core strength (all the muscles from the shoulders down to the knees, which include the muscles active during breathing) are important for good postural alignment and breath support when vocalizing.

Warm Up, Cool Down, and Proper Technique

Athletes start their training sessions with gentle stretches and exercises during warm-ups and end with similar moves for cooling down. Singers are no different—the muscles that act on the vocal cords have to be prepared for the task of singing. Aside from vocal warm up, stretching the core muscles should also be included in the warm up routine. Proper technique can help prevent injury and make the singer a more efficient instrument. Adequate breath support and correct technique can reduce tension and decrease the likelihood of straining the vocal cords and muscles involved in producing sound.

Preventing Fatigue: General Conditioning, Sleep, Rest

Preventing fatigue is important in preventing injury. It is more difficult to achieve proper technique when you are tired, which places you at risk for injury. Having adequate overall endurance, getting enough sleep and rest contribute to counteracting fatigue. Aerobic exercise like walking, swimming or running develops endurance and gets your heart and lungs in the best condition possible. Six to eight hours of sleep per night is generally recommended.

Vocal Overuse and Abuse

Vocal rest is important during the singing day. A good rule of thumb is to have 10-minute break for every 50 minutes of rehearsal, and during those 10 minutes talking should be kept to a minimum. Talking and singing when tired, hoarse or ill is

not advisable. Avoid noisy environments where you have to yell or talk loudly, and avoid whispering as well. Using your voice at these extremes will put stress on the vocal cords. A microphone is very helpful when appropriate.

Hydration

Vocal cords are healthiest and most flexible when they are well hydrated. Aside from drinking enough water, singers have to be aware of their alcohol and caffeine intake; these can dry out the vocal cords. A dry environment such as those in hot climates, air conditioned rooms, and in an airplane can also affect the vocal cords. Using a humidifier or a damp towel on the face may help.

Nutrition

A balanced, healthy diet is always recommended for everyone, and not just for singers. Singers do have to pay attention to food and drink that can cause acid reflux, such as high-fat meats and dairy products, citrus fruits, fried food, spicy food, caffeine, and carbonated drinks. If stomach acid travels up the esophagus, it can irritate the vocal cords, causing inflammation and irritation.

Prescriptions and Over-the-Counter Medications

Singers should ask physicians and pharmacists about the effects/side-effects of prescriptions and OTC medications such as antibiotics, antihistamines, decongestants, etc. Taking medicines individually, rather than in combinations of two to four in one pill, is preferred to better manage effective dosages.

Smoking

Tobacco smoke, including second-hand smoke, irritates the vocal cords. It also weakens and damages the lungs. Exposure to smoke increases the risk of lung and throat cancer.

Key References

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A collaborative initiative of: American College of Sports Medicine (ACSM), Center for Music Arts Entrepreneurship, Loyola University (New Orleans), Performing Arts Medicine Association (PAMA) and supporting organizations—American Academy of Podiatric Sports Medicine (AAPSM), American Medical Society for Sports Medicine (AMSSM), American Osteopathic Academy of Sports Medicine (AOASM), Drum Corps International (DCI), International Association for Dance Medicine and Science (IADMS), Music Teachers National Association (MTNA), MusiCares, National Association for Music Education (NAFME), National Association of Teachers of Singing (NATS), National Athletic Trainers' Association (NATA), National Hearing Conservation Association, New Orleans Musicians Clinic, Sports, Cardiovascular and Wellness Nutrition (SCAN), and The Voice Foundation.