

Keeping your voice healthy

This is potentially a huge subject. There are many factors that can affect our voices, some obscure and some relatively common. I will try to deal with the issues that are likely to face most of us at some time.

It is a good idea to remember that our voice, which is lodged deep inside us both physically and psychologically, is also exposed to the outside environment – it is at the junction of the outside world and all that is within you. This makes it very powerful to express thoughts, emotions and ideas, but also very vulnerable.

It will be most efficient to divide this subject into things that you should do to look after and protect your voice, and things that you should not do. I would emphasise that there are good reasons for each of these points, but I do not have room to go into all of them here.

Ensuring good hydration is one of the most important things you can do.

There are two main ways of getting water into and onto your vocal tract (which includes mouth, nose, throat, larynx, lungs).

1. **Topical hydration** means that you put water directly on structures. You can wet your mouth and the area at the back of your tongue in this way. When you drink water, especially when you are singing, make sure you wet your lips and the area between your teeth and lips, and inside your cheeks. If you are talking or singing, drink water every 20 minutes. Breathing humidified air or steam will help a little.

2. **Systemic hydration** means that the water that you have drunk moves from your stomach and out to all the structures that need it. Our bodies and brains are mostly water and need a constant supply to function well. In order to keep your larynx moist and healthy you need to drink about 3-4 hours before performing. It needs that much time travel from your stomach to your throat. You cannot drink and put water directly on the vocal folds; that would cause you to cough. A good indicator of whether you are drinking enough is that you 'pee pale'. If your urine is dark and smelly, you need to drink more water – eight 8oz glasses per day. If your vocal folds have to vibrate when they are dry, they get hot and the friction causes microtraumas which can lead to permanent damage.

- When you drink coffee and tea, drink an equal amount of water to balance up the diuretic effect. Note that some pain relievers contain caffeine.
- Drink alcohol (which is dehydrating) in small quantities, and balance it with increased water intake.

Remember, thirst is a very poor indicator of when and how much water you need.

Remember too that drinking large quantities of water can be harmful to some people with specific medical conditions. Check with your doctor if you are unsure.

Some other things that you should do

- Keep yourself fit and healthy – this will reflect in your voice. Get enough sleep, have a good diet (including vitamins and minerals), deal with stress levels, maintain good posture, exercise &c.
- Get to know your voice and take notice of what it might be telling you – e.g. tired, tense, ill.
- Speak at your natural pitch.
- Keep doing voice development activities, especially breathing for singing.
- Always warm up before working your voice hard, and then allow it to cool down, too. Gentle mmms around the middle of your range are good.
- Talk quietly when appropriate.
- Use a bell or some other means of attracting attention in a noisy environment.
- Protect your throat by wearing a scarf in winter and not talking in cold air.
- If you have surgery, talk to the anaesthetist about the need to protect your vocal folds.

- Monitor use of antihistamines and cold/flu remedies. You may need to drink extra water to counteract the drying effect.
- Use a microphone when necessary.
- Insist on good foldback when using amplification.
- Avoid alcohol based mouthwashes. Switch to an alternative brand or use warm salt water.
- Avoid using your voice in very dry, air conditioned environments. If necessary replace water vapour with a humidifier.
- Avoid places with foul air.
- Avoid close contact with people who are ill, especially if they have colds or coughs.
- Avoid breathing in dust (weighing out flour always makes me cough if I don't do it carefully enough), aerosol sprays and cleaning agents.
- Seek the help of a professional if symptoms of hoarseness persist for more than two weeks. Go to your GP and ask to be referred to a Speech & Language Therapist or ENT Specialist.

Some things you should not do.

- Don't smoke.
- Don't use drugs.
- Don't clear your throat. This is a damaging habit and does not work. (See separate advice sheet on throat clearing.)
- Don't shout or yell.
- Don't try to push your voice beyond its own pitch range. Work on extending pitch range slowly and carefully. Don't sing songs at a consistently too high or too low pitch.
- Don't talk lots on the day of, or just before a performance.
- Don't talk too loudly on the phone – most people do.
- Don't sing above the noise of a car engine. It is louder than you think. Do practise in the car to learn words, but not vocal expression.
- Don't talk lots in a car, bus or aeroplane, especially if someone is seated behind you.
- Do not talk in a noisy environment. Our voices need to be 5 db above the level of environmental noise if we are to be heard, whatever the noise level around us is.
- Don't vocalise when you sneeze.
- Don't voice loudly when you yawn – gentle yawns are fine.
- Don't whisper loudly.
- Don't speak in 'funny voices'.
- Don't sing outdoors.
- Don't talk when you have a sore throat or laryngitis.
- Don't sing if it hurts to swallow.
- Don't make your voice work hard when you are ill. Use paper and pencil if necessary.
- Don't lift weights.
- **Reflux** occurs when stomach juices come up from your stomach and irritate or harm the delicate linings in your food pipe, throat and larynx. Sometimes you may feel a slight burning or a sour taste, but often people are completely unaware of it. Don't drink alcohol or eat within 2-3 hours of sleeping; don't smoke; don't wear tight clothing or belts; don't eat too much at one sitting and overfill your stomach; limit irritating foods such as coffee, chocolate, spicy or fatty foods, carbonated drinks; remain upright after eating; use extra pillows or raise the head of your bed; go to your GP if symptoms persist.

I do apologise for all these 'don'ts'. Singing is such a positive and wonderful thing. We need to do all we can to keep our voices working well. Because our voice is just another part of our bodies, we sometimes forget to look after it.

Your voice is like a very valuable instrument, and should be treated with as much care.