

PSA:

If You Are a Singer, Your Vocal Hygiene May Be at Risk

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Dangers of Vocal Fold Overuse

A complex process known as “phonation” determines the way we use our vocal folds to produce sound efficiently, giving us each a unique voice. To optimize vocal power, several events must unfold in the larynx, including vocal fold closure, balanced airflow, controlled resonance, and laryngeal stability. Since singers are expected to reach specific notes while maintaining consistent laryngeal stability, overuse of the vocal folds poses a risk. A longitudinal study conducted at the University of Miami revealed that "39% of musical theater, 27% of contemporary, and 22% of classical singers exhibited vocal fold pathologies" (Hilton, 2023). These pathologies can lead to

vocal fatigue or hoarseness, adversely affecting singers' voices. Therefore, singers aiming for longevity in the music industry must comprehend phonation mechanics and the hazards associated with intensive vocal use.

Vocal Fold Pathologies

Consequently, vocal fold pathologies in singers may arise from such overuse. Nodules and polyps, for instance, are benign growths on the vocal folds that can alter their shape, potentially affecting a singer's voice. The voice quality of singers is also affected by muscular dysphonia, which is characterized by hoarseness and roughness. Singers are also susceptible to reflux and chronic laryngitis, both of which cause irritation and discomfort. Following these pathologies, symptoms may include "difficulty breathing, feeling of choking or suffocation, wheezing sounds when inhaling, frequent coughing, tightness in the throat or chest, change in voice, and hoarseness" (Cleveland Clinic, 2021). Furthermore, these pathologies can permanently alter a singer's voice, causing more discomfort than just discomfort.

Warm Up Exercises for Singers

Before participating in any physical activity, stretching and warming up the muscles is vital for a safe and excellent performance. Many might not consider the importance of warming up the muscles of the voice when it relates to singing. Although this is physical exertion presented in a different way, you should not work out these muscles without an adequate warmup because you are putting yourself at risk for health reasons and or a poorer performance.

Athletes who partake in vigorous workouts/games need to get their body and muscles in shape, that is the same thing for singers. Singers need to keep their voice in shape so they can sing and get the sounds that they want. Therefore, keeping those vocal folds and muscles in shape require vocal warm ups so that the voice does not become strained and damaged over time. Beginning with vocal warm ups not only allows the muscles to gradually start working but also can strengthen the vocal folds. Vocal warm ups are quite simple to incorporate into one's routine before performance. Some warm up exercises include

yawn-sigh, humming, vocal straw, lip/tongue trill, and vocal sirens (Vocals, 2024).

Vocal Warm ups

- 01 YAWN-SIGH**
begin to yawn with your mouth closed, then exhale through the nose as if you are sighing.
- 02 HUMMING**
Hum up and down the major scale while keeping the mouth closed.
- 03 VOCAL STRAW**
Take a straw, hum through it starting at your bottom range and going up slowly OR Place the straw into a glass of water and blow bubble through a straw.
- 04 LIP/TONGUE TRILLS**
Press lips together to vibrate as air blows through mouth and nose, allowing your tongue to curl and roll R's.
- 05 VOCAL SIRENS**
Take the "ooo" sound and go from the lowest in your range to the highest

Early-Self Detection of Voice Disorders

Early-self detection of voice disorders is important to avoid further damage to the vocal cords. Depending on the type of voice disorder, symptoms can vary. Symptoms to be aware of include changes to the normal quality of your voice including a "raspy or hoarse voice, or a

hoarse, low and breathy voice” (*Vocal Fold Disorders*, 2023). Other symptoms to be aware of include any changes to swallowing function, or excessive coughing. These symptoms can be a sign of vocal cord paralysis.

If Voice Changes Occur

If an individual experiences overt changes in their vocal quality (e.g. hoarseness) for more than two weeks, they should discuss these changes with their healthcare provider. If these symptoms do not resolve within four weeks, a voice specialist or ENT is the next step for a consult for a more in depth examination of the vocal folds. The healthcare provider will collect a full medical history, physical exam, and also may even perform an examination of the vocal cords with a laryngoscope. A laryngoscope is a small scope used to examine the vocal cords internally.

What to Expect From Voice Therapy

If vocal changes arise one might seek therapeutic services to get their voice back to baseline. These services begin with a referral from an ENT/Otolaryngologist to receive a diagnosis (American Speech-Language- Hearing

Association. (1997-2024). Following, the patient will then receive an evaluation by an SLP. Once initial evaluation is completed and goals are established the patient will then begin therapy. Therapeutic exercises may include: identifying vocally traumatic behaviors that may cause fatigue, education on vocal hygiene/rest, voice therapy strengthening techniques and singing-specific techniques. Some strengthening techniques could be resonant voice therapy which aims to create the strongest and most effective voice with least amount of strain, or semi- occluded vocal tract exercises that also improve vocal cord vibration and reduction of strain to increase a healthy output. In addition, possible singing-specific techniques may include breathing exercises to help with increased and proper breath support relative to singing and adequate vocal warm ups/cool downs after performances (American Speech-Language- Hearing Association 1997-2024). These are just a few of many possible therapeutic services and it is important that therapy is individualized to the patient and their goals.

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