

Vocal Health

My husband Carey learned much of the following while he was in vocal rehab at Baylor All Saints in Ft. Worth. These are helpful instructions that, when paired with healthy singing habits, allow you to have good vocal health.

The voice is like any other muscle...it can be strained or "sprained." When this happens, you might notice hoarseness at the top of your range, or pain when you sing certain notes. The best thing to do when you feel pain is STOP. Singing should not hurt! People who scream at ballgames or concerts actually "sprain" their voice...that's why they get hoarse for a day or two!

Often, singers who sing incorrectly for many years get pre-nodules (as was my husband's case) or nodules on their cords. If speakers/singers continue to use their voice in that unhealthy way and don't go through "rehab", they may have to undergo surgery to remove the nodules. But that's extreme.

If you practice good vocal "hygiene" and take care of your voice (doing warm-ups before and even after singing performances and lessons), it's just like any other muscle...it will be a lot harder to strain it.

Hydration

-One of the best things for overall vocal health and hygiene is keeping hydrated properly (or simply put, drinking a lot of water). Approximately 75% of the American population is borderline dehydrated. Dehydration can make us tired, unable to focus, slow down our metabolism, etc.

-So how does dehydration affect the voice? Well, if you think of the vocal folds as parts of an engine, then water is like oil. It keeps all of the parts of the engine running smoothly. Not enough water makes your vocal folds dry out and literally overheat. This can cause vocal damage over time.

-When your vocal cords are properly hydrated, they are covered in a nice, watery thin film of lubrication produced by mucous glands in the larynx. Dehydrated vocal cords produce a thicker mucous, which means that the vocal folds have to work harder. So sometimes, when you feel like you've got "junk" in your throat -- it's not always allergy drainage. It could mean that you need to drink some water and thin out the mucous that's being produced down there in the larynx.

-How much SHOULD we drink? Well, the "eight 8-ounce glasses of water per day" model is kind of outdated. Now, physicians figure how much water we need based on our weight. So here's the simple formula:

Divide your weight in half, and drink that many ounces of water per day -- not to exceed 100 ounces.

- Some of this water can come from non-caffeinated beverages, such as sports drinks, decaf herbal teas, Crystal Lite, flavored water -- but no more than 40% should come from these other sources. Really, it's only going to take more water to break down any beverage that contains sugar and dyes. When it comes down to it, nothing is going to do you any better than good old pure water.

-Before and during singing/public speaking, don't drink ice-cold water. Really cold water shocks the vocal cords -- it's not good for them. So drink cool to room-temperature water.

-How do I know if I'm staying properly hydrated? The easiest and most non-scientific way is to check color of your urine (gross, I know, but stay with me)-- your urine should be a clear to a very light pale yellow color. So if your urine looks like Mountain Dew: Houston, we have a problem:-)

-Indirect hydration: Besides your normal daily intake, you should start drinking water an hour or two before you sing/speak. Why? To hydrate the interior of the vocal cords, it takes several hours for your body to disperse the water at the cellular level.

-Direct hydration: in addition to indirect hydration through drinking water, you may also directly hydrate the vocal cords through the use of steam. Most drugstores (CVS, Walgreens, etc.) carry a personal steam inhaler for about \$20. It just uses pure water (no medication). Five minutes of breathing steam prior to speaking or singing is a good way to hydrate and soothe your cords.

Dr. Gould's Gargle

-If you are feeling dryness or discomfort in and around your vocal cords, another good find is this home-made gargle:

$\frac{1}{2}$ tsp. salt

$\frac{1}{2}$ tsp. baking soda

$\frac{1}{2}$ tsp. clear Karo syrup

Dissolve in 6 ounces of warm water. Gargle and spit out small amounts until it's gone. Don't eat or drink anything for 20 minutes afterwards.

A good routine

People who use their voice a lot—pastors, speakers, singers—should try to get in a healthy routine. Here's an example for a church pastor:

1. From the time you wake up until church starts, try to drink about one-third of your proper daily intake of water.
2. Closer to the time that church starts, inhale five minutes of steam from your personal steamer.
3. Before you leave the house, have a round of Dr. Gould's gargle.
4. Once you're at church, have some water to sip on throughout the morning.

Of course, you can customize this routine to fit your needs and your schedule. If you're experiencing vocal problems, these steps should only improve the situation. Furthermore, I'd suggest keeping up such a routine even when you are in "good voice" -- these tips can also help prevent future problems.