

How Singing Improves Your Health

(Even if Other People Shouldn't Hear You Singing)

by www.SixWise.com

If you ever have the desire to break out into song -- in the shower, in the car, maybe at your neighbor's infamous karaoke night -- you should embrace it whole-heartedly. This ancient art not only feels good, it can enhance your well-being, reduce your feelings of pain and even prolong your life.

Using your voice to sing, rather than simply carry out a conversation, offers unique benefits. "When we sing instead of speak, we have intonation, melody line, and crescendo, which gives us a broader vocabulary to express ourselves," says Suzanne Hanser, chair of the music therapy department at Berklee College of Music. "Because singing is visceral (relating to, or affecting, our bodies), it can't help but effect change."

Singing Reduces Stress and Pain

Studies have linked singing with a lower heart rate, decreased blood pressure, and reduced stress, according to Patricia Preston-Roberts, a board-certified music therapist in New York City. She uses song to help patients who suffer from a variety of psychological and physiological conditions.

"Some people who have been traumatized often want to leave the physical body, and using the voice helps ground them to their bodies," Preston-Roberts says. "Singing also seems to block a lot of the neural pathways that pain travels through."

Singing for Seniors

Singing, particularly in a chorus, seems to benefit the elderly particularly well. As part of a three-year study examining how singing affects the health of those 55 and older, a Senior Singers Chorale was formed by the Levine School of Music in Washington, D.C.

The seniors involved in the chorale (as well as seniors involved in two separate arts groups involving writing and painting) showed significant health improvements compared to those in the control groups. Specifically, the arts groups reported an average of:

- 30 fewer doctor visits
- Fewer eyesight problems
- Less incidence of depression
- Less need for medication
- [Fewer falls](#) and other injuries

Even lead researcher Dr. Gene D. Cohen, director of the Center on Aging, Health, and Humanities at George Washington University in Washington, D.C., was surprised at how big of an effect the seniors' arts participation had on their health.

"My surprise was not a factor of whether the intervention would work, but how big an effect it would have at an advanced age," said Cohen. "The average age of all the subjects was 80. This is higher than life expectancy, so, realistically, if an effect were to be achieved, one would ordinarily expect to see less decline in the intervention group compared to the control. The fact that there was so much improvement in many areas was the surprise factor."

The seniors themselves also noticed health improvements, said Jeanne Kelly, director of the Levine School of Music, Arlington Campus, who led the choral group. The seniors reported:

- Feeling better both in daily life and while singing
- Their everyday voice quality was better
- The tone of their speaking voice did not seem to age as much
- Easier breathing
- Better posture

Singing and Alzheimer's Disease

Taking the feel-good effects of song a step further, Chreanne Montgomery-Smith of the Alzheimer's Society founded Singing for the Brain, a singing group for those with dementia, memory problems or Alzheimer's disease.

"We do have quite an avid following in the group that we have. Families believe it has enhanced their lives and in some ways it has kept people well longer. People who have constant memory problems are so undermined by this, but somehow the memory for singing is preserved for ever in the brain and it gives people a lift when they can remember things," Montgomery-Smith says.

The part of the brain that works with speech is different than the part that processes music, which is what allows people who can no longer converse to still enjoy music, said Clive Ballard, director of research at the Alzheimer's Society and professor of age-related diseases at King's College, London.

"People seem to enjoy doing something jointly with other people and there is a lot of evidence that being socially engaged is good for people with dementia," Ballard added.

Singing tutor Liz McNaughton, who is a freelance voice coach with Singing for the Brain, said the sessions have beneficial effects on the participants' cognitive powers, physical ability and emotions.

"It would seem, and there is a lot of research about this, that the music has the ability to access words. It is so powerful that people who have lost their ability to speak can access songs and words from the melody," she said.

The Singing for the Brain sessions are so popular that McNaughton has been asked to run similar workshops for people with Parkinson's disease and those who have had strokes and head injuries, along with people who have special needs.

Singing Boosts the Immune System and Well-Being

Several studies have found that singing also enhances immunity and well-being. One, conducted at the University of Frankfurt in Germany, found that choral members had higher levels of immunoglobulin A and cortisol -- markers of enhanced immunity -- after they sang Mozart's "Requiem" than before. Just listening to the music did not have this effect.

In another study, members of a choir filled out questionnaires to report their physical and psychological reactions to singing. The choristers reported:

- Improved lung capacity

- High energy
- Relieved asthma
- Better posture
- Enhanced feelings of relaxation, mood and confidence

Singing and the Arts Becoming a Widely Accepted Health Tool

The arts are showing up as a treatment tool in hospitals across the country. In fact, a survey by the Society for the Arts in Healthcare (SAH), Americans for the Arts and the Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations found that 68 percent of the hospitals surveyed incorporated some form of arts therapy into their treatment option.

"The arts helped the hospitals to humanize their facilities," said Naj Wikoff, president of SAH. "It's good community relations, and it improves the way the patients feel about their care -- it clearly increases customer satisfaction."

And, if you're thinking of [volunteering](#), singing at a hospital may be a good choice -- not only for the patients but also for yourself.

"Hospitals are often glutted at holidays with people wanting to sing, but we need more people year round," Wikoff said.

Sources

BBC News: How Singing Unlocks the Brain (See Article #2 below)

Chorus-America: The Singing-Health Connection (See Article #3 below)

Natural Health May 2005 (See Article #4 below)