



Vocal Health FAQs

(Submitted by Jackie Kyle-Kelly, GHC Monday Tenor)

From this web link on the NCVS site: <http://ncvs.org/e-learning/faqs.html>

Q

When I get a bad cold, my voice is often the final symptom to recover. What is laryngitis and why does it often occur at the end of a virus?

A

Laryngitis is the inflammation of the vocal fold tissues. We often get laryngitis at the end of a virus because of irritation of vocal fold tissue from flu symptoms or viral-associated coughing and sneezing. Speaking with irritated or swollen vocal folds may prolong the inflammation, so it may feel like the voice is the last to recover after all other cold symptoms are gone.

Another aspect of slow recovery has to do with the body's natural healing process, which involves the removal of dead cells. While vocal tissues are undertaking this "clean up" task, the tissues are more viscous (thicker) than normal.

Q

I read that clearing your throat too much is bad for your voice. Why? It seems that having excess mucous in your throat makes it harder to speak.

A

Clearing your throat is very abusive to the vocal fold tissue, as you basically are grinding the vibratory edge of each vocal fold against the other. This causes swelling and irritation of the vocal fold in the middle of the vibratory edge, which then hits first before any other part of the vocal fold. Chronic irritation and swelling in this area can lead to the formation of vocal fold masses such as nodules.

The other aspect of the throat clear, as much as it feels like it clears off the mucous, only moves the mucous to

the side of the vocal folds, and that mucous eventually makes its way back to the vibratory edge. This begins the viscous cycle of constant throat clearing.

There are better alternatives to clearing away the excess mucous:

a silent cough say the word "huh with oomph from your belly without voicing followed by a swallow (kind of like coughing, but without voice)

humming can move away the mucous

a sip of water can move away the mucous

a gentle cough with lots of air in front of it is still less abusive than a throat clear.

Q

What is the most important preventative measure for having a healthy voice for one's entire life?

A

Many behaviors recommended for maintaining overall health also help ensure a lifetime of good vocalization. This involves properly hydrating your body with at least 64 ounces of water a day, using adequate support from your abdominal muscles when you speak or sing, and avoiding vocally abusive behaviors such as throat clearing, coughing, yelling, screaming or prolonged loud talking. You should warm up your voice before you use it, just as you stretch before exercising. You should also habitually speak at a pitch that fits your voice.

Eating a healthy diet, exercising your body and your voice regularly, and getting enough sleep are also important factors in vocal health. Managing your stress level can also help. Be careful when taking over-the-counter medications such as aspirin products (Aleve, Motrin, Advil, Aspirin, and Excedrin) as they are blood thinners and can put you at greater risk for sustaining a vocal fold hemorrhage (bleed).

Other medications such as antihistamines can be very drying to the voice. Caffeine and alcohol are diuretics and actually remove fluid from your tissues (including your vocal fold tissue!) Minimize your intake of these beverages, and drink an equal-sized glass of water for every caffeinated or alcoholic beverage you drink to counteract the drying effects. [This is in addition to the 64 ounces of water you should already be drinking.]Q

If I have a sore throat, is it a good idea to whisper until I'm feeling better?

A

Actually, you may be better off using your normal voice gently and quietly rather than whispering. Whispering can alter the manner in which your vocal folds come together, often compressing the vocal folds in the middle where your tissue is most likely to swell when you are sick. Whenever you have a sore throat, you should minimize your voice use if possible. If you are uncertain whether you are safe to use your voice, it is always

best to see an otolaryngologist who specializes in voice care.

Q

I have heard that it is a good to do vocal warm-ups before extensive singing or speaking. What exercises do you recommend?

A

It is always important to warm-up your voice before any kind of singing or speaking. Gentle humming exercises, lip or tongue trills and breath-stimulating exercises like Ya-ha-ha-ha-ha (1-3-5-3-1) with a release in between each note are good for warming up the voice. Your volume should stay around mp (medium soft). You may also want to see Dr. Titze's webpage, [Top Vocal Warm-ups for Singers](#).

Q

What changes should an elderly person expect in her voice? His voice?

A

Several changes can occur in the voice with the aging process. However, just as with the rest of the body, many changes can be stalled with regular exercise and overall healthy lifestyle choices (such as adequate hydration, a nutritious diet, and avoidance of vocal irritants such as cigarette smoke). Typical changes due to aging include possible:

atrophy (weakening) of muscles and nerve tissues resulting in vocal fold bowing;

stiffening or arthritic arytenoid joints, causing incomplete vocal fold closure and subsequent breathy vocal quality;

vocal fold tissue thinning and wasting with lesser vibration, causing hoarse and/or breathy voice;

roughening of the vocal fold edge, perhaps caused by depletion of the mucosal layer.

Other changes can occur due to changes in hormone levels:

Women can have a lowering of pitch from the loss of estrogen in their bodies during and after menopause. This can be prevented or reversed with estrogen replacement therapy.

Men's voices tend to get higher as they age, as their levels of testosterone drop.