Basic Healthcare For Your Voice by Sheri Gould

Taking good care of your voice can mean having both a preventive and remedial approach. I'm going to have a look at both in this two-part series.

Preventative

Taking care to NOT injure your voice is the first and best thing you can do for your vocal longevity and effectiveness. There are many things that you do during the day that you may not even be aware of that can cause vocal strain or fatigue. Let's look at some of them.

Overuse and Abuse

There are many ways that we abuse or overuse our voice. Simply talking for long periods of time can do this. Especially if you are speaking at an elevated level like when you're at a wedding reception and the band is playing loudly. Most weddings occur on Saturday and if you talk your way into the night at the reception, you may well find your vocal cords swollen and tender in the morning. Not the best thing for your Sunday morning service!

Yelling at the kids (or spouse-yikes!) can be damaging as well. Any strain on the cords will eventually cause you problems. If you find yourself constantly dealing with throat issues, you may well need an overhaul on your lifestyle. Perhaps the way you speak is causing strain, or the way you sing. Allergies are also really hard on the vocal folds. Post nasal drip is very irritating to the cords.

Coughing/Clearing Your Throat

Both coughing and clearing your throat are very abrasive. I frequently give the illustration that clearing your throat is akin to scratching the vocal folds with sandpaper. My Ear, Nose and Throat doctor has told me, that you can cause your cords/folds to BLEED simply from clearing your throat too rigorously. So what is a body to do when there is that annoying phlegm riding on the cords/folds? First of all understanding WHY the phlegm is there in the first place may make a difference in how you choose to manage your phlegm in the future (pleasant subject huh?).

Phlegm is nature's way of providing protection for your vocal cords/folds. If your cords have experienced any type of trauma, your body is designed to provide a bandage (protection) to prevent further damage. So first of all note that IF you have phlegm, THERE IS A REASON. Solve the root of the problem FIRST to avoid further phlegm. Simply clearing your throat may seem like the most expeditious thing to do, but ultimately it will only exacerbate the problem. When you 'clear' your throat, you scratch your cords and 'voila!' your body sends more phlegm! So avoid this at all costs. Ask yourself first, "Why did I get the phlegm in the first place?" Then try to solve THAT problem (we'll discuss some of the possible reasons later).

Ridding yourself of the phlegm can safely (albeit not as quickly) be done in a number of ways. What you want, is to GENTLY vibrate the cords so that the phlegm "falls" off and is not SCRAPED off. This can be done by swallowing, talking or humming. The fastest way may be humming in the lowest part of your range, therefore providing the largest vibrations. You can also talk through you phlegm but I personally find this difficult to listen to! The sound of phlegm rattling while someone talking causes ME to want to clear my throat! So be careful when you choose THIS option (I'd rather listen to fingernails on a chalkboard). Humming is a great

choice provided you can do this inconspicuously. Continuing to swallow repeatedly will also eventually work. You may have to be patient but it will be worth the effort because when it's gone, it's GONE. If it does come back it will be slower to recur and will not likely be as much. So take your time in dealing with this "blessing" that God has given us to protect our cords.

Avoid stressing your cords while singing

Many times we stress our cords simply by not warming up properly. Just like an athlete needs to stretch and warm up before playing a sport, you need to stretch and warm up your vocal cords as well. Trying to sing with a full voice or at the outreaches of your range too soon can be one of the culprits of unnecessary stress and of course phlegm. Start your singing day out slowly. Warm up by gently 'waking up' your cords through humming. Any warming up you can do in the shower will be extra great as the moisture will help lubricate the cords (you always sound great in the shower too!). Then continue your warm-up routine being careful not to talk too much or too loudly first thing in the morning. This will pay off. Many of us rush to church on a Sunday morning, grab a microphone and start wailing away in our 'belt voice' and then can't figure out why we're hoarse and sore after the service(s).

Get Lessons!

Many singers end up stressing their cords during singing simply because they do not understand the basics of proper singing. It's so important to understand how the vocal mechanism works and to work WITH your body and not against it. If your throat is sore after you sing, take heed! There is a reason for pain. It's a warning. If you experience pain on a regular basis when you sing, then you need to figure out why. Getting some good vocal training is invaluable in terms of saving your voice from harm. Some basic things to look for in your body are: any kind of strain or muscle tension in the throat or facial area. When you sing, you need to be completely relaxed. When you start seeing or feeling tension, that's when trouble can start. A good vocal coach can help you to see this in yourself and teach you how to avoid further vocal strain.

Remedial

What do you do if you think you've hurt your voice? There are different levels of damage that can be done to the vocal cords. Most of the time, the kind of damage we do might be very temporary. For example: we've stayed up very late talking into the night. Or, we over sang this week because we were getting ready for a big production and attended five rehearsals—about four more than we're used to. We attended a wedding and spent four hours at a reception trying to yell over the band. All of these types of activities can produce the same general results. Sore and swollen cords when you wake up in the morning, your normally soprano or tenor voice sounds much like a froggy bass. If you ARE a bass you're thrilled that you can FINALLY hit that low 'C'!

This is a temporary, albeit troublesome, problem. There are some helpful things to do. The first thing your cords need is to REST. My guess is though—you can't let them! It's Sunday morning and you have to sing! So here's what you're going to do. The minute you realize you've strained your cords, start to do everything you know to do. Get as much sleep as you can. Drink a bunch of water. Turn on your vaporizer. Don't talk. When you get up on the morning you HAVE to use your voice, take as hot of a shower as you can and keep the bathroom door closed and don't use a n exhaust fan! Create a steam bath. Breath in deeply through you r nose. After you're been breathing in this yummy moist air for about ten minutes. Start to S-L-O-W-L-Y go through a very gently warm-up consisting mostly of gentle humming. Don't push. Don't look to get to the ends of your range, in fact avoid the ends of your range as much as possible when your cords are hurting. Sing quietly once you do start to practice.

Keep some 'Throat Coat' by Traditional Medicinals handy at all times. You can always find it at GNC but my grocery store carries it as well. Also, look for menthol-free throat lozenges-Hall's 'Fruit Breeze' are one example. The menthol will dry out your cords-it helps clear your sinuses but is not good for your cords. The same is true for lemon. Lemon might give you an immediate lift of 'shrinking ' the cords back closer to their normal size, but the cost is having them dried out—so use it sparingly—if at all. Honey is great because it soothes and coats the cords. When you use the Throat Coat, don't be in a hurry to make it. Let it steep for as long as possible. I even make mine at night before I go to bed, wake up in the morning and re-heat it. Using boiling water and cover your cup to let it steep for a minimum of a half an hour to get the max benefits from the herbs. Make a double dose and bring it with you in your thermal coffee cup to sip on throughout the morning.

Once you start to rehearse with your team or choir, try the best you can to sing in a light, airy tone. This will help you go through the parts you need to without straining the cords as much. When you add air to your tone, yours cords don't experience as much friction so its easier on them-of course you don't sound as good but save that for the time you really need it. Sing as little as possible then go back to total rest for your cords.

If your problem is that you are actually sick, for example you really have a sore throat from a virus then the remedy would be very much the same if you have the need to sing immediately. In addition, gargle with Listerine 3-4 times a day for 30 seconds. Do this at the onset of ANY kind of sore throat and you may void it completely. I've had GREAT luck with this. Others recommend gargling with salt water, but I particularly find this more effective. See what works best for you.

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At ANY rate, if your cords or your throat is sore and you can avoid singing or using your voice altogether, that is the best thing. Total vocal rest is the best as soon as possible. If you continue to sing when your cords are hurting or damaged in any way over time you may develop more serious vocal issues.

More Serious Damage

What do you do if you've truly damaged your cords? First of all, you need to determine how serious your damage is. This can be done with a visit to your Ear, Nose and Throat doctor. Some clues that you may need to see a doctor would be: constant hoarseness, constant phlegm, a gravelly sound in your speaking voice that doesn't go away, pain in your throat when you talk or even swallow that doesn't go away. Any of these symptoms can indicate something seriously wrong.

One of the singer's worst nightmares used to be the dreaded nodes or polyps. Although these are still scary and need immediate attention, they are no longer the threat they once were. I am not a doctor, but my understanding is that a node is almost like a 'callous' that develops over a period of time when the cords have been 'banged' together too harshly over an extended period of time. Many popular singers have been treated for nodes and recovered nicely. However, usually there needs to be some re-training before the singer is allowed to sing again. Misuse and perhaps a simple lack of vocal knowledge and care many times are the contributing factors.

Not all polyps or nodes require surgery. If they are small enough, they can sometimes be treated with a more conservative approach. One of the most important things you can do is get proper vocal training, perhaps even speech therapy to see if that is where your true problem lies. In addition, TOTAL VOCAL REST is necessary. This means no talking, whispering, singing, coughing, sneezing, throat clearing, ANYTHING that makes a noise from your throat! But do not try to self-treat if you have the above mentioned symptoms. Go to a doctor ASAP!

As always, an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. Your voice is a gift from God and needs to be cared for properly. Take the necessary steps to care for your voice in a way that will make it possible to use your voice for God's glory for as long as possible! God Bless!