

# 10 DAILY HABITS FOR A HEALTHY VOICE

By Jonathan Flowers 1/17/2020

## 1. HYDRATE—many experts list this as the most crucial habit for vocal health.

- a. *What to drink:* water, decaffeinated herbal teas, electrolytes with little or no added sugar (Gatorade Zero, Smart Water, Nuun tablets). Make water your main drink. Fruit juices are not adequate substitutes for water. If you like fruit juice, consider diluting to half with water, or add a squeeze of lemon, lime or other citrus to your water.
- b. *Drinks to limit or avoid:* caffeine & alcohol –which are dehydrating. Consume an additional 8 ounces of water for each serving of these substances because these substances are dehydrating.
- c. *How much per day:* half your body weight= optimal daily water consumption in ounces. Singers and heavy voice users need more water than those who use their voices less.
- d. *When:* drink frequently throughout the day. Water directly contacts the vocal folds only when gargled. Several hours are required for consumed water to be distributed to cells. Therefore, consuming most of your water just prior to and during rehearsal will not lubricate your vocal folds sufficiently.
- e. *Hot or cold:* Warm and room temperature liquids are preferred over cold or iced beverages. Avoid cold beverages entirely if you suffer from acid reflux. (Lowering the temperature of the stomach can trigger the stomach to produce more acid to break down food.)

## 2. AVOID IRRITANTS

- a. *Inhaled:* smoke (tobacco and other—it's all bad!), chemical & gas fumes, allergens (especially pollen, mold, dust). You can choose to smoke, or you can commit to developing your voice, but you can't do both!

## 3. REST

- a. With insufficient rest, your voice will be impaired. PERIOD!
- b. Take breaks from noise and digital distraction. Breathe deeply. Meditate. Musicians need to cultivate mental focus and relaxation to preserve energy for making music!

## 4. DIET

- a. *Avoid or limit inflammatory foods:* fried, refined sugars and grains high sodium processed foods, hydrogenated and trans fats, alcohol and caffeine. Eat whole grains in moderation and dairy in moderation.
- b. *Foods to eat:* lean protein, anti-inflammatory fats (monounsaturated: olive oil, nuts; Omega-3: fish, flax and chia seeds) healthy carbohydrates (mainly fresh fruits and vegetables).
- c. *Foods to avoid shortly before singing:* dairy (can produce mucous); nuts, nut butters, and salty crunchy snacks (may dry the throat), alcohol & caffeine (dehydrating)

## 5. EXERCISE

- a. Daily exercise reduces stress and bodily tension, improves flexibility and breathing for singing. If you hate the gym, take a walk! Don't believe the myth of the plus-sized opera singer: singing is a high-performance activity that will be enhanced by healthy body weight.

## 6. DAILY WARM-UP

- a. Do the Rise and Shine Warm-up each day when you wake up. (See separate handout). This routine can and should be done even when you are resting your voice due to illness (unless your doctor tells you otherwise).

## 7. HEALTHY SPEAKING HABITS

- a. Speak at a moderate pace with abdominal breath support and clear articulation

- b. Vary the pitch of your voice around your optimal central pitch (as explained in Rise and Shine Warm-up). Observe your pitch and breath support when speaking on the telephone or at close distances with your listener.
- c. Whispering dries the voice. If your voice is tired or you need to speak softly, use a light, slightly higher pitch with soft onsets.
- d. Never talk above noise. Either talk through it at a moderate level, or –even better--wait for the noise to subside.
- e. Refresh your voice throughout the day by humming (UM-HMM) and doing short gently glides on a lip trill.
- f. If you have phlegm-DO NOT CLEAR YOUR THROAT FORCEFULLY. When you do so, you risk irritating or injuring your vocal folds by slamming them together. Instead, do one or more following:
  - i. Hard Swallow: pump tongue against back of roof of mouth,
  - ii. cough gently without vocalizing,
  - iii. take a sip of water

For further information about voice conservation, click the following link:

<https://medicine.uiowa.edu/iowaprotocols/handout-voice-conservation>

## 8. MEDICATION USE

- a. Be aware of how your medications may affect the voice. A basic list appears below.

SYMPTOM	RECOMMENDED (not harmful to the voice)	AVOID (unless instructed by a medical professional)	Reason to avoid
Headache, pain	Acetaminophen (Tylenol),	Aspirin Naproxen (Alleve)	Avoid using during heavy voice use b/c may decrease platelet function
Nasal congestion	Saline solutions, nasal irrigation (e.g., Neti pot, sinus rinse bottle), nasal decongestant sprays (Astelin, Tavist, Rhinocort), steam inhalation	Anthistamines (Benedryl, Chlortrimetron). If you have nighttime cold medicine, take it at night and if possible not during the day when you might be speaking.	They dry the vocal folds. If you must use, avoid singing.
Phlegm/mucous, sore throat, post-nasal drip	Guafinesin (Mucinex, Robitussin. When taken with lots of water, may stimulate hydration of vocal chords), Dr. Gould's Gargle (see below*) warm water or herbal tea with honey and lemon	OTC medications labeled "Cold and Flu"	They may cause excessive drying of the vocal folds and mouth. If you must use, wait several hours (or a day) before singing, or use at night before sleeping.
Coughing	Dextromethorphan (Robitussin DM, Mucinex DM)	Same as above	Same as above
Gastric Reflux	Gaviscon (better for voice than Rolaids because it does not include calcium. Proton Pump Inhibitors may be prescribed (Prilosec, Nexium)	Tums and Rolaids-use in moderation	These contain calcium which can cause stomach to produce more acid

- *Dr. Gould's Gargle*: mix ½ tsp baking soda, ½ tsp salt, 1 tsp clear Karo syrup (corn syrup) or honey in 6 oz warm water. Gargle one small mouthful at a time.

Sources cited for above list:

National Center for Voice and Speech (2020) "Prescribed Medications and Their List of Effects on Voice and Speech". Accessed January 17, 2020 at: <http://www.ncvs.org/rx.html>. [Comprehensive database, searchable by drug name, symptom, and drug group.]

Seelig, Tim (2005). *The Perfect Blend*. Chapter 11: Vocal Health. Shawnee Press, Inc.

## 9. HEALTHY SINGING HABITS

- a. Stretch your body and warmup your voice before practicing, rehearsing, or performing
- b. Hydrate before, during (if possible), and after singing
- c. Sing with proper abdominal breath support and healthy vocal technique
- d. Sing music appropriate for your vocal type and range
- e. In an ensemble, listen at least as much as you sing
- f. Take frequent breaks while practicing and rehearsing to study your music silently, stretch, and take deep breaths. Do gentle sirens, yawn-sighs, tip trills, and tongue trills periodically to keep your articulators and vocal chords flexible.

## 10. SEEK MEDICAL TREATMENT WHEN NEEDED

- a. I recommend that every singer have at least a yearly checkup with an ENT doctor (otolaryngologist) if your health plan will cover specialist treatment. At the very least, know your status regarding respiratory issues, allergies, reflux, speech, and hearing.
- b. If you experience hoarseness for two weeks, see a doctor immediately. Find out if your symptoms are related to any of the following: allergies, respiratory infection, GERD (gastroesophageal reflux disease) LPRD (laryngopharyngeal reflux disorder—acid reflux flowing upward into the larynx—this has serious effects on the voice), sinusitis, or other conditions suspected by the medical professional.
- c. Look up any prescriptions on the database at ncvs.org cited above. Let your doctor know that you are a singer and want to minimize or avoid any treatments that may compromise your voice.