

Caring for Your Instrument: The Voice

Remember: your voice is your instrument. The more you care for it, the better it will sound. Think of yourself as being in training. Like most athletes, you want to keep yourself tuned up for peak performance.

Your Body

The body responds well to plenty of rest, good nourishment, and lots of water.

Exercise regularly to improve breath control.

Learn relaxation techniques so that you can use them for warm-ups and general stress reduction at any time.

On performance days, don't drink whole milk or eat dairy foods as they can cause mucus to form near your vocal folds.

Avoid caffeine. Caffeine is dehydrating.

Avoid mentholated drops as they dry out your vocal folds. If you must take anti-histamines, increase your water intake to compensate for dryness.

Keep your drinks at room temperature: not too hot and not iced.

Your Vocal Mechanism

Your vocal chords are tiny muscles residing in the larynx. They aren't much bigger than the nail bed on the pinky finger of your hand. If they get inflamed, you will find your voice quality altered -- hoarseness, for example.

Avoid abusing your vocal mechanism. Don't cough excessively, yell, scream, or talk at the end of your exhalation. Don't use your voice for extended periods of time without a rest.

Use diaphragmatic breathing and projection of the voice to increase volume. Use amplification if you will be in large spaces with poor acoustics.

Know your material well. This will help you avoid stress and tension before performances.

Use relaxation warm-ups and gentle vocalizations with an open throat. You can achieve an open throat with better resonance by yawning deeply and feeling the back of your throat open and extended.

When Things Go Wrong and You Wake Up Hoarse

Rest and drink plenty of fluids.

Give your voice a vocal rest. This means *no* talking. Not even a whisper (which is actually worse because it puts more strain on your vocal chords). If you must speak, try speaking in a lower or higher pitch. Your best recourse is vocal rest.

Drink soothing liquids like tea with honey.

Suck non-mentholated cough drops or hard candy.

If you are still hoarse after one week, see a doctor to rule out strep throat.

Have some chicken soup. It can't hurt.

A Short Warm-up Routine

You can do this daily and before performing.

Reach up high, gently lower your body towards your toes, then gradually raise your body one vertebra at a time. Do this three times.

Sit comfortably in a quiet place, feet planted firmly about ten inches apart. Breathe deeply five times, lengthening each exhalation a little bit. To avoid dizziness, always make the exhalation longer than the inhalation.

Gently bend your neck, breathing out as you relax your head in each of the four directions. Don't roll your head. Rolling your head can be harmful to your vertebrae.

Lift your shoulders up to your ears, hold for five seconds release.

Yawn. Open your throat and practice reciting the first part of your story in an overly open throat manner. Yawn several times. Repeat this exercise again.

Practice counting on one breath while enunciating each sound precisely in an overly exaggerated manner. Keep your body in a relaxed state at all times.

Use acupressure-type hand massage, especially between your thumb and forefinger and in your palms. Relaxation is a key component of producing a good voice.

Practice the last line of your story in an open throat, relaxed mode. Practice the first line of your story in the same way.

Smile. Go on stage. Take in your audience with your eyes.

Tell your story. You're ready!