



Care of the Young Singing Voice

By Robert Marks

The vocal mechanism is extremely delicate, and can be easily injured. Frequent yelling or shouting, poor singing or speaking habits, excessive throat clearing, and many other behaviors can lead to vocal abuse. For example, cheerleaders are often asked to cheer as loudly as possible, and are often hoarse after a practice or game. Trying to speak over loud music can also hurt the voice. It's very important for singers to treat their voices with care.

Voice problems are not always due to vocal abuse; illness can also lead to hoarseness and loss of voice. If your voice is hoarse or raspy, seeing a doctor is always a good idea, especially if you have other symptoms, or a performance coming up. In any case, make sure you drink plenty of water and get enough rest. Keeping the throat moist will help minimize coughing and throat clearing, which is really the "banging together" of your vocal cords.

Vocal Production

Singers should be aware of the basics of vocal production, especially the workings of the *vocal cords* (sometimes referred to as “vocal folds”). The vocal folds are ligaments with elastic properties within the *larynx*, (sometimes known as the *voice box*). The larynx has three main functions in the body: (1) sound production, (2) air flow, and (3) preventing food and liquid from passing into the lungs. When air is passed between the vocal folds, the folds vibrate, producing sound.

If you pluck a rubber band, the pitch rises as the band is stretched, and lowers as there is less tension. The vocal folds behave in a similar way: the thinner and longer they are, the higher the pitch. When the folds are thick and short, they produce a pitch that is lower. Minimizing tension in the throat should be one of the main focuses of voice lessons. When singing, it’s important to have a sufficient flow of air through the vocal folds.

Nodules

The word *nodule* (or *node*) refers to calluses on the vocal folds, somewhat like scar tissue on skin after a cut is healed. The nodule prevents the vocal folds from completely coming together, resulting in a voice with an airy and/or raspy quality. The cords are often thickened as well, which makes it difficult or impossible to sing well. An otolaryngologist (ear, nose, and throat doctor) should be consulted, and a course of treatment decided on. This may include vocal rest, speech therapy, voice lessons, and medication.

Belting

Technically, “belting” refers to singing with the larynx in a high position, loudly, often with tightness in the mouth and throat. Many voice teachers discourage belting for their students. However, many styles of music require it. My feeling is that belting is not damaging as long as the belting is:

1. Not too high
2. Not too loud
3. Not for too long.

It’s important for singers to learn good vocal technique. That doesn’t necessarily mean preparing for a career in classical singing, but at the very least making sure that there is sufficient breath to sustain a musical phrase, and minimal tension in the head and neck areas. Every voice teacher has a different approach, but good singing should not hurt or make you hoarse.

Voice Change

Voice changes typically occur during puberty. It’s not only males who experience a change in voice, but the female voice change is not as radical. Male vocal folds may increase by over two times that of the female, resulting in a singing voice a full octave lower than prior to the voice change. Some boys experience a slow, gradual change, and others have a drastic, abrupt change. Only nature determines how quickly the voice changes, and compensatory key adjustments to songs may need to be made to repertoire, sometimes on a daily basis!

Dealing with Occasional Hoarseness

There is no magic formula for restoring a hurt voice. Resting the voice will allow it to heal, and keeping it moist with liquids and lozenges will help. If hoarseness is an ongoing problem, it’s important to examine the underlying causes, and have a medical examination to rule out a pathological condition.

Tips for Protecting the Voice

1. Get plenty of rest
2. Avoid yelling and shouting
3. Avoid loud and/or prolonged talking
4. Avoid unnecessary coughing and/or throat clearing
5. Drink plenty of water
6. Sing in the proper keys
7. Make sure there’s adequate breath support for your vocal phrases
8. Speak at the proper pitch for your voice
9. See an ear, nose and throat specialist if vocal problems persist

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