



Love YOUR LARYNX

BY JACKIE SAUNDERS

■ There are all kinds of products you can use to protect instruments. Guitars, keyboards, drums, as well as brass and woodwind instruments, have special cases designed to keep them safe from the elements.

Singers can't walk into a music store and simply purchase a case to protect their instruments—they have to make healthy choices. Whether you harmonize sweetly singing Handel's *Messiah* in a choir, or shred vocals in a raging rock band, you need to care for your instrument too.

Dr. Denis Lafreniere, professor and chief of otolaryngology at the University of Connecticut Health Center and Dr. David Parks, professor of voice at the Ithaca College School of Music, recognize the importance of keeping the body in tip top shape. "Singers are like athletes," says Parks. "We may not use our pectoral muscles like Michael Phelps doing the butterfly, but we use a fine set of muscles in our craft."

Many times young singers overtax their voices because they can recover quicker, but it is harder for people in their 40s and 50s to do the same thing. "Because of advanced technique, older singers may not tire as quickly, but their voices repair less quickly," says Parks. "It becomes necessary to pay more attention to sleep, nutrition, and hydration."

Parks and Lafreniere shared some simple tips to keep your voice performance-ready all the time.

RELAX, JUST DO IT. Vocal naps, or simply avoiding speech for 45 minutes, will keep you from overstraining your voice before a concert or performance. "The voice can't keep up if you're a teacher or have a job where you are talking all day," says Lafreniere. "Try resting your voice for even 20 minutes or, if you're driving home from work, instead of singing along with the radio, just listen to it." If you have a big concert at night, take a cue from professional singers who refrain from speaking all day long.

SOOTHE YOUR INNER SONG-BIRD. Slippery elm throat lozenges work great to soothe the throat and don't contain any irritants that aggravate the larynx, says Lafreniere. Used by opera singers, Slippery elm lozenges can be found at health and natural food stores and vitamin shops. Avoid mentholated and medicated cough drops that mask pain—a signal to the singer that something is wrong—and coat the cords, dulling their ability to vibrate properly.

FILL UP ON WATER. Vocal cords are made up of two strips of muscle and need a moist atmosphere to remain supple, to allow optimal vibrations. This means drinking about half a gallon of water each day. Lafreniere recommends also keeping your vocal system hydrated by doing at-home steaming treatments, especially during the dry winter months. Boil four cups of water, pour into a bowl, and place a dampened towel over your head and the bowl, trapping the steam inside. Or, take a hot shower.

SAY NO TO A CUPPA JOE. The caffeine in coffee, tea, and various soft drinks is a diuretic, which also dries the vocal cords and aggravates stomach reflux. Many singers do not realize this happens because there are no symptoms of heartburn. Try to avoid caffeinated beverages before you need to sing since reflux causes mucus in the throat, making it feel like you're vocal cords are covered. If you need a steaming hot beverage, try noncaffeinated tea with a bit of honey.



DITCH THE DAIRY. Avoid milk, yogurt, cheese, ice cream, or any type of dairy product since this produces phlegm and hinders your vocal cords' ability to ripple and produce a clear sound.

LOSE THE BOOZE. Another piece of advice that's a no-brainer, alcohol also has a drying effect, causes reflux, and dilates blood vessels, which can alter vocal fold function. Parks, a serious singer, usually will cut out his alcohol consumption a month prior to a concert.

BRING IT ON DOWN. There is so much emphasis on warming up that few people realize it's equally important to warm down your voice after a performance. Lafreniere recommends five to 10 minutes of warming down after a robust concert where you push the envelope with your voice. To get the volume and pitch of your voice down to normal range, make a yawning motion with your mouth and sing ahhhummm from a high to low note.

AVOID SPICE—IT'S NOT SO NICE. Put down the nacho chips smothered in salsa and those steamy buffalo wings. Spicy foods also aggravate reflux in singers, which causes swollen vocal cords, excessive throat clearing, and a feeling that there is a lump in the throat.

QUIT LIGHTING UP. This should require little explanation but smoking cigarettes and being surrounded by puffs of smoke irritate the respiratory tract giving you a raspy voice predisposed to injury. Other negative effects include hoarseness, increased risk of cancer, and the imminent impairing of lung function that is essential for well-supported singing.



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