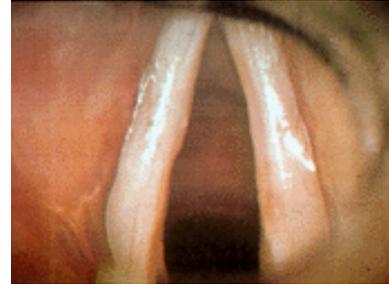




# VOCAL HEALTH!



Your vocal cords are two little flaps of flesh. They make noise. How?

When air goes over them, they can vibrate and then bounce off each other. Each bounce alone sounds like a single little click, but over and over, hundreds of times each second, and those clicks turn into tones. They bounce faster for high notes, slower for lower notes. The little attached muscles help change their length and width, to change how fast they vibrate. Then the air going past them draws the sound out, and the pressure can also affect the vibration speed. [Wanna see?](#)

When there is **coordination** of the breath and the vocal muscles, you have good sound.

**Most vocal problems happen when the breath and muscles lose coordination.**

There are lots of ways to lose coordination.

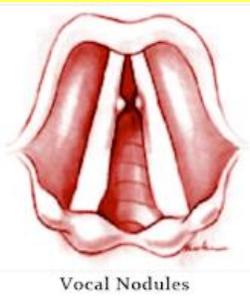
If the cords are swollen, for whatever reason, they lose coordination.

If the surrounding muscles are too tight, they get tired easily, and then shaky.

If they're too dry, they literally *stick* on each other, causing friction and swelling.

If there are bumps or scars on the cords, they don't bounce off each other evenly.

Really bad bumps are called **VOCAL NODES**.



**Nodes**, or nodules, are calluses, just like you get on your heel or your hands. They get built up from slapping your cords together in just the same place every time. Once they start, they get worse. They can completely stop you from making sound. Fixing them can mean surgery (like Justin Timberlake and Adele and Bjork and John Mayer), but will definitely mean going through a period of **TOTAL SILENCE** – complete vocal rest. The nodes may go away, but the singer usually has to learn how to sing all over again, or they come right back.

**But this won't happen to you.**

Musicology research shows that singers with solid voice training have far fewer problems with nodes and hoarseness than singers without voice training.

Why? Because the trained singer knows the **cardinal rules**:

Warm Up - Breath - Rest - Water

## The Cardinal Rules

<b>WARM UP</b>	<b>BREATH</b>	<b>REST</b>	<b>WATER</b>
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**Warming up** keeps those tiny muscles flexible, gets the blood moving through them. But don't forget the big muscles, too. Your whole torso, your legs, your arms, your skull, your face, lips, tongue, they all need to warm up, too. More about that [here](#).

**Breath** is like the gas in a car. No gas, no go. Weak or weird injection, and the engines sputters. Solid breath support is a habit you have to learn solidly, or a million other things will interfere. Nerves, shyness, stiffness, and fatigue all interfere with supported breathing, but a strong discipline saves the day.

**Rest** seems obvious, but in an impatient world, silence is the most underused prevention and remedy for vocal problems. Treat your throat like an athlete treats her body – rest is part of the workout regimen. And if it gets hurt, treat your throat like a pitcher treats his arm. Sometimes you will have to skip a gig if you want to heal.

**Water** keeps those cords juicy. 4-6 glasses a day will keep you properly hydrated from the inside, so cells can regenerate. Sip from a glass of warm or lukewarm water during and after a voice lesson.

<b>AVOID:</b>	<b>Caffeine</b> – in excess, it dries you out <b>Smoke</b> – it dries you out and gives you cancer <b>Cheerleading</b> - or repetitive shouting of any kind <b>Extremely cold or very hot liquids</b> – especially right after you sing <b>Stage Whispering</b> – it can stress your voice <b>Throat clearing</b> and <b>Coughing</b> - they stress your voice really fast
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### **Myths:**

**“Singers should avoid dairy products because it makes phlegm.”** Avoid dairy if you want, but don't diss the phlegm. Part of good resonance and vocal endurance comes from a healthy, viscous mucosal layer. So: hydrate well, warm up well and most phlegm is fine, even after a milkshake.

When singers create highly restrictive rituals around avoiding any hint of phlegm, more often it means “I'm nervous.” (See 'psychological turmoil' below). When they're nervous, their throats constrict, breathing suffers, and even a thin layer of beneficial phlegm feels like a choking lava flow.

**“Rock and roll singing is bad for you.”** Nah. Bad singing is bad for you. Rock and roll, blues, jazz, pop, Broadway - it's all okay if you warm up, breath efficiently and sing the rough stuff only for short periods of time. Some genres (gospel, high chest pop) may require more care than others, just like football is riskier than bowling. You don't need a helmet for bowling. Usually.

**“Oh you must try [slippery elm, honey/lemon, echinacea, garlic, elk placenta, etc.]** Almost all vocal remedies for voice issues are placebos, and some actually make things worse. Lemon and honey tea can give you reflux. Vitamin C megadoses can mess with digestion. And, remember: anatomically, nothing you swallow ever touches your cords at all. That said, a placebo can be a nice distraction, at least. Read more about it [here](#).

## Oh My God I Think I'm Losing My Voice!

Easy, there. First, don't panic. Second, I said don't panic. Most of your relationship with your voice is psychological, so, really. Relax.

1. Is the sound you make unusually raspy or scratchy?
2. Is your throat sore when swallowing, speaking or both?
3. Is your nose stuffed up or runny; are you coughing?
4. Is there swelling, or discoloration?
5. How do you feel otherwise?

### See if any of these explanations fit:

**Simple overuse.** Your throat may or may not hurt, but the sound may be scratchy. Primary: vocal rest and water. For a few days, rehearse just your breath exercises. Wait for quiet before you try to speak during your day. When first phonating (making noise), use [lips trills](#) and conscious, low, quiet inhales. Vary your music genre style in warm-up (to shift stress points around your vocal tract), and use more body warm-ups (to improve breath coordination).

**Allergies.** It's not your throat's fault. The cords sit under the plop plop of post nasal drip, which makes them raw and swollen. Water well. Advil or Tylenol can help the soreness. Steam yourself in the shower, eat, drink, walk around. Work with your doctor on your specific allergy, but be wary of excessive amounts of anything. Too frequent netti pots can wash away beneficial mucus. Too much Advil and you risk vocal fold hemorrhage. Antihistamines work to reduce the post nasal drip, but too much and they can dry you out faster than you can re-water.

**A cold.** Same as for allergies, but a cold can settle in your chest. The mucus drips, you snuffle, it hardens in your chest and you cough it up. Yuck. Decongestants are alright in small doses, though I advocate physical exercise first as that can open sinuses and get metabolism moving. The coughing is what really hurts the cords, so try to suppress it. Keep hydrated, and take an expectorant only if it is a truly dry hacking cough.



**A laryngeal virus.** Occasionally a bug camps out right on your cords. Viruses stay as long as they want, so sit back and relax. Don't try to talk if the voice isn't there. Carry a pad and pen around with you. Use sign language. Don't stage whisper. Water well. A laryngologist can help you if you don't get your voice back within 2 weeks. Yes, it can take that long and still be normal.

**Reflux:** Acids from the stomach can pop up and touch the vocal cords, causing irritation, swelling and even ulcers on the cords themselves. We become more at risk for reflux with age. Symptoms may include vocal hoarseness, irritation, and increased mucus or the desire to clear the throat. Reflux laryngitis doesn't necessarily cause heartburn symptoms, so work with an actual doctor, using an actual laryngoscope, to know for sure. Without a scope, it's just guessing and bias.

**Injury.** Ever gotten a soccer ball in the neck? Ow. Physical injuries, whiplash, straining before a warm-up, swallowing sharp objects, friction from surgical intubation -- these are injuries, and they hurt. See a doctor. Rest. Water.

**Irritants.** These are low grade injuries. Smoke, exhaust, dust, some artificial sweeteners or certain allergens, very cold or dry air, very cold or hot liquids, can all hurt. A lot of those "medicinal" teas and throat sprays are actually more irritating than healing, so don't be fooled by exotic names. Rest. Water.

**General fatigue.** When you are tired, no part of you is at its peak. But for singers, the crucial issue is when the big muscles in your torso droop and sag. That's like a car engine dropping out.

Two paths: 1) Rest until you feel better. Check your posture. If it's a strain to keep your spine up, don't try to sing. Lay back and hum instead.

OR

2) Or do jumping jacks and dance around a little to activate your circulation.

**Age.** It's not really age, it's a something related to age, like hormonal shifts (which can affect mucous membranes), or reduced blood flow, muscular changes, reflux, etc. Know: 1) aging beats the alternative, and 2) you CAN adjust. Typically, that means do more practice sessions, making each shorter in length, but with more time on warm up than you might have done before. Learn new genres and new songs.

**Psychological turmoil.** For most singers, the psychological element is by far the most powerful. First realize that singing is natural no matter what emotional state you're in – happy, sad, angry, confused, sassy. There's a singing to go with it, and you don't have to be in a perfect state of bliss or focus every time. Sing anyway.

Or don't. There are also ways to work on your singing without actually singing: go listen to music; play the piano; learn some music theory, either from someone [serious](#) or [irreverent](#): write a song, or maybe just lyrics; make up a wild dance and lipsync to a song you like; see a video about singers; connect with another artist, and support your artistic village. Get out of your own head.

**Nerves.** If you're nervous, address the nervousness. Don't even START thinking you're losing your voice until you calm down, because adrenalin makes shitty diagnoses. Here's a [fine article](#) to help you when you're nervous.

And finally –

Remember that everyone can get a sore throat, but it doesn't mean you'll never sing again. Human voices are incredibly robust and resilient, and very temperamental.

Imagine that your voice is an 800 pound gorilla, who really loves to be treated like a dainty little fairy princess.

Treat it nice, but never forget how strong it is.

