

KEEPING YOUR THROAT IN SHAPE by Dr. Sadhana. Nayak

Daily warm up and cool down exercises are an absolute must in training routines for vocal performers. Warming up the voice is analogous to stretching the body and limbering up done before any athletic activity involving strenuous use of muscles. Cooling down is exactly the opposite of a warm up, performed at the end of heavy voice use. This is similar to the athlete's stretching and cooling down after running.

The vocal performer may consider himself/herself to be a vocal athlete. The production of voice involves the finely coordinated activity of several muscles viz. muscles involved in breathing, the fine muscles which produce movements of the vocal folds in the voice box and the muscles of the tongue, throat, lips, face and palate. Consistent practice each morning prepares the vocal folds and the muscles of the vocal mechanism for the demands of the day.

What happens to the vocal folds during the warm up?

The vocal folds contain muscle tissues as a major component. As is the case with other muscles, the vocal folds depend on efficient blood circulation for good function i.e for vocal range, flexibility, endurance and strength. Good circulation is stimulated by an appropriate warm up procedure. Athletes and dancers who depend on well coordinated muscle function warm up their muscles in advance. This warming up is done either by movements or massage of the muscles. It is impossible to massage the vocal folds directly. But the same effect can be achieved with gentle phonation or voice exercises.

Many people neglect warm up and cool down procedures and therefore develop minor technical errors to compensate for inadequate control and flexibility of the voice. These technical errors lead to vocal strain, fatigue and decreased range and often contribute to the development of voice disorders.

What does the warm up routine comprise and how much time should be spent on it everyday?

The warm up routine includes a muscular stretch and range of motion exercises for the neck, shoulders, lips, palate, jaw and tongue. These are also useful for relaxation of the muscles and help increase kinesthetic awareness. If the patient is a singer, he/she is then asked to vocalise the musical scales provided to him/her. These provide aerobic conditioning. Speaking exercises provide the patient with the equivalent of singing scales for the speaking voice. The final step in the daily routine is the speaking exercises which usually include breathing exercises for developing good abdominal support, palatal exercises for improving oral resonance, sustained hums, lip trills and a variety of gentle phonation exercises. In a vocal performer with a voice disorder, the voice specialist and therapist review each exercise at periodic intervals and provide new tasks as the need arises. A daily warm up routine of 15 to 30 minutes in the morning and a cool down routine of 5 to 10 minutes after strenuous voice use is generally recommended, but varies according to individual needs.