

## Sniffly Singer's Guide to Recovery

As singers, our health really affects our instrument. Exhaustion, sickness, PMS, injury, and even allergies can really change our sounds and abilities. This document contains recommendations for how to take care of your voice if you are feeling unwell, how to practice without using your voice, and how to tell when you are ready to sing again.

### *Taking Care of Your Sick Voice*

**The best thing to do if you are sick is to not sing.** As hard as it sounds, resting is the fastest way to recovery; taking a day off, resting vocally and holistically, allows your body time and energy to fight infection. Especially with sickness that causes hoarseness or loss of voice (laryngitis, cough, throat irritation, sore throat, post-nasal drip, etc), singing and speaking as little as possible can improve symptoms and discomfort. It's okay to cancel your lesson if you're feeling icky - your teacher will appreciate it if you stay home just as much as your voice will!

Everyone has different preferences for recovering from illness or injury, and the following are suggestions to help relieve discomfort and take care of your voice as you recover. You do not need to spend money or try new medicines/supplements if you do not want to - take what resonates and leave the rest! This document really serves as a common cold guide; if you see a doctor for your illness, many of these recommendations may work in tandem with but never in the place of a medical diagnosis and/or prescription.

\*Please read label warnings and contact your doctor about any/all of the following medications and supplements, as some may not be appropriate for you or can have interactions with your medications or diagnoses.

### *Relieving Sinus/Nasal Congestion*

- Non-Medicine
  - Sinus Rinses
    - Sinus rinses like NeilMed, Neti Pot, or Navage (which use saline or xylitol solutions) can help flush your sinuses of mucus and potentially the cause of inflammation.
  - Breathing in Hot Steam
    - Taking a hot bath or shower, using a nebulizer (use saline in your nebulizer!), using a humidifier, or hovering your face over a pot of boiling water can help loosen up mucus and relieve sinus inflammation. Hot baths also have the added advantage of activating much of your lymphatic system to help with drainage throughout your body, as well as help relieve aches and pains (especially if using epsom salts).

- Staying Hydrated
  - Staying hydrated helps to thin mucus and aid in recovery.
- Lymphatic Drainage/Massage
  - Massaging the lymph nodes and sinuses in the face, neck, and arm pits can aid in reducing inflammation as well as relaxation.
- Medicine
  - Allergy Medication: Antihistamines\*
    - Allergy medication, or antihistamines, block the body from creating histamines, which cause the sneezing, congestion, or runny nose symptoms of allergies. Often paired with a decongestant, they can help reduce cold symptoms and stuffy sinuses.
  - Decongestant: Pseudoephedrine (Sudafed)\*
    - Temporarily relieves sinus decongestion and pressure. Congestion is caused by inflammation; inflammation is caused when the body sends extra blood to the site of infection. Pseudoephedrine narrows the blood vessels to relieve inflammation and in turn makes it easier to breathe.
  - Expectorant + Decongestant (Mucinex)\*
    - Mucinex and other expectorant/decongestant combos use the same decongestant as Sudafed with an expectorant which loosens up mucus and lubricates your airway, which usually makes coughs more productive.
  - Decongestant Sprays (Nasocort/Flonase, Astepro, Afrin\*\*)\*
    - Decongestant sprays such as antihistamine sprays can aid in reducing inflammation in the nasal by using a corticosteroid to block the release of the cells and processes which cause inflammation. They usually also narrow the blood vessels and reduce tissue swelling.
      - \*\*Afrin is a local congestion relief spray, but should not be used for more than three days at a time (per ENT/doctor recommendation). Frequent use can cause rebound congestion (congestion that comes back and may be worse). If you need to use Afrin or a major congestion relief spray for more than three days in a row it may be time to consult a healthcare professional.

### *Relieving Throat Pain/Inflammation*

- Non-Medicine
  - Staying Hydrated
    - Staying hydrated helps to thin mucus in the throat and relieve throat inflammation.
  - Gargling Salt Water

- Mixing ¼ to ½ tsp of salt into 8 oz of water (people usually find warm to be more soothing, but cold works, too), can help to lubricate the throat, flush mucus, and kill off some bacteria.
- Drinking Warm Fluids
  - Drinking warm tea, water, or broth can aid in hydration and relieve inflammation from the throat, as well as in flushing mucus from post-nasal drip. Many singers swear by Throat Coat tea, which can have slippery elm or echinacea, but even warm water will help you!
- Unmedicated Throat Lozenges
  - Natural throat lozenges often contain honey, menthol, lemon, ginger, echinacea, slippery elm, and other naturopathic herbs that can help reduce inflammation and lubricate the throat.
- Honey
  - Honey has some antimicrobial, antioxidant, and anti-inflammatory properties, so it can soothe irritation. It's easier to use in tandem with a warm beverage like tea, but even just a plain spoonful can help.
- Heat Pad/Warm Wash Cloth
  - Using a heat pad or warm washcloth for the lymph nodes in your neck and around your neck can help increase blood flow and lymphatic drainage and relieve some irritation symptoms. If you are running a fever and feel hot, using heat to relieve symptoms may not be appropriate, but a cold pack or washcloth on the back of the neck or forehead can
- Medicine
  - Medicated Cough Drops/Throat Lozenge\*
    - Medicated cough drops often contain menthol and/or benzocaine, which are a cough suppressant and local anesthetic which can help soothe sore throats. Some contain dextromethorphan which is a common cough suppressant.
  - Pain Relievers: Acetaminophen, Ibuprofen, Naproxen\*
    - Many people use a pain reliever to reduce inflammation and fever. Most over the counter pain relievers bind to the enzymes that cause inflammation, pain, and fever. (Do your research on what pain relievers you can use when! They can have some nasty side effects if you use too much, and you can easily confuse what types they are.)
  - Cold Medicine\*
    - Cold medicine often contains a pain reliever (don't double up on an over the counter pain reliever and cold medicine - be careful and aware of what pain reliever to use when!), antihistamines, cough suppressants, decongestants, and expectorants. Daytime cold meds favor decongestants (which keep you awake) while nighttime cold meds favor antihistamines

(which can make you drowsy). Because cold medicine is a four-for-one special, it's better to save it for when you need a heavy hitter and to be careful if you are taking other types of medicine at the same time.

### *Relieving Cough*

- Non-Medicine
  - Staying Hydrated
    - Staying hydrated helps to soothe a scratchy cough.
  - Drinking Warm Fluids
    - Drinking warm tea, water, or broth can add in hydration, relieving inflammation, and flushing mucus.
  - Breathing in Hot Steam
    - Just like for congestion, taking a hot bath or shower, using a nebulizer (use saline in your nebulizer!), using a humidifier, or hovering your face over a pot of boiling water can help loosen up mucus and relieve chest pressure and inflammation. Hot baths also have the added advantage of activating much of your lymphatic system to help with drainage throughout your body, as well as help relieve aches and pains (especially if using epsom salts).
- Medicine
  - Vapor Rub (Vicks VapoRub)\*
    - Camphor, menthol, and eucalyptus oil are the active ingredients which relieve minor throat irritation and cough, as well as minor muscle and joint pain.
  - Medicated Cough Drops/Throat Lozenge\*
    - Medicated cough drops often contain menthol and/or benzocaine, which are a cough suppressant and local anesthetic which can help soothe sore throats. Some contain dextromethorphan which is a common cough suppressant.
  - Cough Syrup\*
    - Cough syrup often contains a cough suppressant (like codeine or dextromethorphan) and an expectorant to help relieve coughs and loosen mucus. Many also contain antihistamines to help reduce inflammation and congestion symptoms.
  - Expectorant + Decongestant (Mucinex)\*
    - Mucinex and other expectorant/decongestant combos use the same decongestant as Sudafed with an expectorant which loosens up mucus and lubricates your airway, which usually makes coughs more productive.
  - Cold Medicine

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*Additional Immunity Supplements (not FDA approved)\**

Most of these can be found as over the counter supplements (some even in gummy form) and some are concentrated oils you can diffuse.

- Vitamin C - immunity
- Bromelain, or Quercetin-Bromelain - inflammation
- Elderberry - immunity
- Echinacea - immunity, inflammation
- Ginger - inflammation, immunity
- Garlic - inflammation, antibacterial
- Lavender - inflammation, immunity
- Turmeric - inflammation, immunity
- Peppermint/Menthol - inflammation
- Eucalyptus - inflammation, immunity

## *Non-Singing Practice Sessions*

Recovering from sickness, feeling tired, or just not feeling like singing today? There are lots of ways to practice without singing.

1. Annotating
  - a. Annotation can mean marking your breaths or phrasing, writing in translations or staging, counting rhythms in difficult sections, or highlighting your part in scores. I often write in my scores at the same time as I listen to them, that way I can make note of specific dynamic markings, phrasing, textual emphasis, or tempo changes that may be traditional or interesting that I would like to use when I sing the piece.
2. Listening
  - a. Listening to your pieces helps to get the melody in your ears, contextualizes the accompaniment, and shows you unique interpretations of musicality. Even if there is a specific singer you really like, listening to many versions and singers helps us to not to cement one “correct” version of the song that we feel like we have to copy and or imitate when we sing.
3. Reflecting
  - a. Recording your lessons and listening back to them helps us understand voice techniques and exercises as well as hear our own voices. Reflection can be as simple as listening back and mentally making note of the exercises and sounds that really stand out. Many people record their thoughts in a journal. For example, listing a particular exercise or approach and stating the difference it made in the sound production helps us understand where and when using that technique can be helpful in other songs, i.e. “lifting the piano exercise made accessing my upper register/head voice easier in both warm-ups and while we were working on my song... I can apply this to (insert different song) where I also need to use my head voice.” Reflecting helps us determine what we need to work on when we practice as well as discover questions we may have for future lessons.
4. Watching
  - a. Watching recorded or live performances can help to inform your facial expressions and body movements - watching videos of your songs in the context of a full show, recital, competition, audition tape, or other type of performance can give insight to character choices and might inspire your own interpretation of the character and piece.
5. Monologuing (if you feel recovered enough to talk!)
  - a. Speaking through the lyrics without the context of the rhythm and pitches can create unique textual emphasis and connect us with the words emotionally, as well as help with memory and acting.

## *Am I ready to sing yet?*

If many of your symptoms are gone and you haven't sung in awhile, you might want to start testing the waters. If you still have symptoms like a cough, loss of voice, or throat pain, it's best to wait until those symptoms dissipate before you try to sing. Recovering from sickness before singing is just like recovering from anything else; you have to start by taking baby steps! When you go through these steps, if any of them feel too difficult, are exhaustive or painful, or just sound plain wrong, that is your cue to take a break and not continue further steps. It may take awhile, which can be frustrating, but it is important to take your time so as to not cause further damage or injury.

1. Breathe and Stretch/Massage
  - a. It's been awhile since you've had to take big singing breaths and flex your singing muscles; take some time to tune into how your body feels. Practice supportive inhalations and stretch/massage at minimum your sides, neck, and jaw. Your body can often tell you how much you can handle if you listen to it. If your body feels ready to sing, continue.
2. Warm-Up (Slow and Steady)
  - a. Starting at a comfortable place in your range, do a few short warm-ups. Using a hum, straw, lip-trill or other semi-occluded vocal tract (SOVT) exercise can help us start to sing healthily with less pressure. Take this time to analyze how your voice both sounds and feels. Can you sing an octave without cracking? If there is no pain or discomfort, the sound is not difficult to produce, and there isn't any hoarseness or missing pitches, continue to warm-up into higher and lower parts of your range. If you feel like you are ready to practice your pieces, continue.
3. Practicing Pieces (Slow and Steady)
  - a. Applying some SOVT exercises, singing your piece the octave down, and slowing the tempo of your piece can help ease you into your practice session. Again, if your body feels ready, you can continue to move at a steady pace to 30% or 50% or 75% of your "full singing" - whatever feels accessible today is totally okay and it is okay not to get to 100% for the first day, or three, or two weeks of you recovering. Your instrument is in your body, and you can only sing as well as you feel.
4. Reward
  - a. You deserve a pat on the back for singing while recovering! Take a nap, grab a cup of tea, eat a cookie, text your friends (or your voice teacher), do whatever it is you need to do to help you feel that sense of accomplishment. :)
5. Rest
  - a. Take a little time to recover and let your voice rest. Great job! You can cool down using some of the SOVT warm-ups you started with or self-massage.