

Prolonging Your Vocal Life

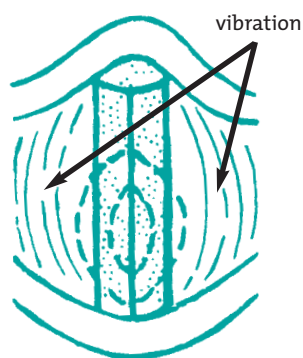
The Perils of Spending Down

How many years will you be able to enjoy singing? While Ella Fitzgerald sang into her eighties, Janis Joplin destroyed her voice in less than a decade. Sadly, at present modern medicine cannot predict how long you will be able to sing. We have observed, however, that abusive behaviors can dramatically decrease the lifespan of a singer.

There are many misconceptions regarding exactly what is abusive with respect to the larynx. I believe an easy way to understand the concept is to think of vocal activities as spending certain amounts of *vocal currency*. We all start off with a certain amount in our “vocal accounts” (each person with a different starting amount). We dispense “funds” with each vocal task. Whether speaking, yelling or singing, each task requires a certain amount of vocal currency. When activities such as these place stress on the vocal folds for prolonged periods without rest (as in lecturing, speaking on the phone, talking over noise at restaurants/bars), they “cost” you more vocal currency.

With each second of *phonation* (producing sound) your vocal folds contact each other anywhere from 100 to 1000 times. The louder your voice, the harder the vocal folds slap against each other. There is a limit to their capacity to absorb this shock without causing

Vocal Bands



structural changes to the vocal folds. Over many years it is this collision that causes a wearing away of the jelly-like *superficial lamina propria* (the shock-absorber layer) of the vocal fold, leading to stiffening, scarring and permanent *dysphonia* (loss of voice). At present there is no ideal solution to this loss, but surgery to move the vocal folds closer together does result in a louder voice with less effort. Unfortunately, these procedures do not restore a natural singing voice.

Resting the voice, treating irritative factors such as Laryngopharyngeal Reflux (LPR), and using proper techniques can add value to your vocal account, but not enough to counteract abusive behaviors. There is no exercise, vocal technique or surgery that will completely replenish the

account. After many years of vocalization (even proper vocalization!), some people’s accounts run so low they start to have vocal difficulties and have to see a laryngologist. Unfortunately, by then the damage has been inflicted and easy solutions are hard to come by.

Please remember that all you do with your voice, however trivial it may seem, will “cost” you vocal currency. You have to decide how you “spend” that currency, as it is not a limitless resource. Keeping that in mind, try to avoid these common vocally-abusive situations:

- Prolonged speaking on the phone (longer than 15 minutes at a time)
- Conversations in environments with competing noise (bars, loud parties)
- Excessive singing
- Singing/speaking through a cold
- Singing with improper vocal technique

This Holiday Season, “spend” wisely. ||

CS welcomes **Ramon A. Franco, Jr., M.D.**, to its advisory board.

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