

# The Voice and Swallowing Institute

## Vocal Warm Ups

Warming up the voice is important and helpful for professional voice users (singers, actors, and broadcast personalities), for occupational voice users (teachers, salespeople, for example), for those with injured voices, and for anyone who is preparing to give a presentation or wants to make a good impression with their voice. Allow approximately 20 minutes to perform a complete warm up. Ideally, these warm-ups should be performed leisurely, but with good mental focus and attention to detail. Make sure you are well hydrated – drink lots of water before and during your warm-up exercises. Pay attention to your posture while you do these exercises. Good (but relaxed) posture is important for full and easy range of motion of the muscles and full breath support.

### What is the purpose of vocal warm ups?

There are many beliefs and accepted “truths” about vocal warm-ups, but very little scientific data to support or refute these beliefs. What we “know” about vocal warm-ups is really based upon collective personal experience of many singers, singing teachers, voice therapists, voice scientists, athletes, athletic coaches, sports physiologists, and students. Warming up the body is used in athletics as well as artistic performances. Somewhat surprisingly, there is not a lot of research in sports physiology to describe the effects of warm ups. The voice production system has some unique characteristics that make it somewhat difficult to transfer conclusions from studies in other parts of the body to the larynx.

The warm ups may increase blood flow to muscles and other tissues, thin out thick secretions, and decrease use of excessive muscular tension, but of course we are not positive. Perhaps there are certain patterns of coordinated motor activity that are most optimal for performing a specific vocal task, and perhaps the vocal warm-ups allow us to “access” those patterns. And again, we are not certain. So we are left, at the moment, with carefully considering hypotheses and subjective experience. With that caution, we believe that warm ups improve the performance of the individual muscles of the thorax (chest), larynx and upper vocal tract (throat, mouth), as well as the coordination between the subsystems of voice production, namely the lungs, larynx, and upper airway articulators. Every warm up routine contains a number of different exercises to focus upon different muscles and different movements. Warm ups are hypothesized to improve performance and to contribute to the prevention of injury.

### Is it harmful to warm up for too long?

It is probably more important to know *why* someone is warming up for longer than usual, rather than the actual effects of a lengthy warm up. There are two warning signs related to warm ups that may indicate a voice problem:

1. Needing progressively longer, more extensive vocal warm up periods in order to

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- achieve a clear voice
2. Decreasing the duration of the vocal warm up routine in order to “preserve” the voice – fearing that a full vocal warm up will tire the voice.

If you are experiencing either of these phenomena frequently and you don't have a cold or the flu, you may be in the early stages of a voice problem. We suggest that you schedule a visit to the Center for the Voice for evaluation.

#### **A few notes about vocal warm ups for performers.**

Some artists find it helpful to perform gentle warm-ups each morning, in addition to full warm ups before a lesson, rehearsal or performance. This is especially important if you are experiencing vocal problems due to reflux or vocal fatigue. Some artists perform these exercises in a steamy bathroom to take advantage of the warm moisture. Many artists find that practicing vocal warm ups also provides a mental warm up, increasing awareness of kinesthetic feedback. Don't confuse vocal warm ups with *vocalizes*.

Performing *vocalizes* is the process of acquiring a specific vocal skill (or set of vocal skills) such as articulatory precision, smoothness of register transition, vowel balancing, singing wide intervals, increasing accuracy of vocal onset with maintenance of tone, and correcting technical faults. *Vocalizes* should be practiced after the voice is warmed up.

Each artist will develop his or her own routine of warm ups, which may be varied depending upon the nature of the role. If you are a performer currently studying vocal technique, it is likely that your teacher has his or her own opinions about preferred warm-ups. Some advise starting fairly low in the pitch range and extending upward, moving from limited range exercises to wider ranges. Other teachers prefer starting at the higher end of the range and moving downward to avoid carrying the “chest” voice up to high before becoming fully warmed up. Some teachers prefer exercises that do not exceed a fifth, others favor an octave or a twelfth. These are issues to discuss with your teacher and explore with your own voice!

**A word about Vocal Warm-Downs:** Many professional voice users routinely use vocal warm downs after rehearsals and performances. Though not as commonly used as warm ups, some performers find it helpful to perform a short routine of gentle vocalizing, such as relaxed humming, massage of the neck, throat, and lower face, easily “cooing” the /u/ vowel (as in coo). It may be that warm downs help release some of excessive muscle tension that may accumulate during rehearsal or performance, especially vocally demanding roles. Some performers who sing primarily in a heavy “chest” register, or “belt”, find that it is helpful to warm down the voice by singing lightly in a “head” (falsetto) voice. As with warm ups, there is no scientific data to support or refute the utility of warm downs. The analogy to athletes is used, in which muscle cramping and strain can occur after demanding activities if the muscles are not stretched in a

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cool-down routine. While “cramping” of the laryngeal and oral muscles has rarely been observed in healthy individuals, certainly it may be helpful for performers to “disengage” from demanding vocal performances by performing warm down exercises.

### **A note for individuals with injured voices.**

If you have a voice disorder, vocal warm ups may be an important part of your voice therapy program. Although we have no proof that vocal warm-ups are helpful in cases of vocal fold and voice disorders, we think that, in addition to the benefits explained above, they may help in other ways too, by:

- re-focusing the patient on healthy voice use patterns
- relaxing the muscles to prevent use of excessive muscle contraction

Discuss warm ups with your voice care team before initiating a regular warm up program.

### **Whole Body Warm-Ups**

Professional voice users – singers, actors, radio personalities, and other performers – have known for a long time that a healthy and beautiful voice requires excellent whole body positioning. Good posture is an important component, but proper alignment and balanced, smooth movement are also essential for good vocal performance. Nobody stands still as a statue when they use their voice, in routine or in performance. Fitness work-outs, Hatha yoga, Alexander Technique, Pilates, Tai Chi, Feldenkrais® Method are just a few of the many disciplines that can be studied to improve whole body positioning. For the serious vocal performer, and for the voice patient working to heal and improve the voice, incorporating whole body warm-ups into the vocal warm-up routine may be helpful to prevent and decrease excessive muscular tension and optimize vocal quality.

### **A voice specialist\* can help improve your warm-up routine. He or she can:**

1. Provide a suggested optimal order of warm ups. Not all warm up exercises have an equal level of difficulty of performance. It may be best to proceed from easier to harder exercises.
2. Provide a broad range of warm ups. Different warm up exercises focus upon different components of the voice production system. It may be best to incorporate exercises into your routine that focus on different areas of the vocal tract and vocal technique.
3. Tailor a set of routines for your particular needs. As with any type of exercise, you may benefit from focusing upon specific areas of the vocal tract or vocal technique for your personal needs.
4. Provide feedback on doing it correctly. Reading about exercises and doing them

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correctly can be two very different things! A small adjustment in voice or body position can make a critical difference in how much benefit you receive from a particular warm up exercise. And doing them wrong can sometimes be harmful to your voice.

\*Voice specialist can refer to different professionals, depending upon your specific needs. These include the voice therapist (state licensed speech-language pathologist with expertise in voice therapy), singing teacher, choir director, or voice coach.

### **Is there one ideal set of vocal warm ups?**

No, there are as many warm-up routines as there are people who do them. Just as there is no single correct way to speak or sing. Sometimes, a warm up routine can become “traditional”; it is used by so many voice professionals that it becomes a standard. If it works, great. If not, don't use it. No vocal warm up routine is sacred! Everyone has their favorite set of warm ups and just like any exercise, there's a certain amount of personal preference to doing warm ups.

Some warm up exercises may work better for you than others. Some of the warm ups require more vocal skill and experience than others. In general, warm ups progress from gentle sound production in the middle of the pitch and dynamic range, and slowly progress towards the extremes. As with all skilled routines, these are best learned under the guidance of a teacher. Working with a teacher or voice therapist provides the best feedback to make sure you are getting the most out of these warm ups. There are many (strong!) opinions about which warm up exercises are better than others, and the order in which they should be performed; another good reason to obtain guidance from a voice professional to develop one's own personalized set of vocal warm up routines! Look through these warm up exercises. All are common routines that many people use in one variation or another. Explore some of them and see if they are right for you. For all of these warm ups, sit or stand in a relaxed and balanced position, moisten your mouth and lips with a few sips of water and inhale slowly on a yawn or through deep but relaxed inhalation through your nose. Keep your shoulders low and relaxed

### **Yawn-Sigh**

- Inhale slowly on a yawn. Feel the air in the back of your throat. Keep your jaw hanging relaxed and your tongue relaxed on the floor of your mouth. Make sure your shoulders are low and relaxed.
- Exhale slowly. Keep your head and shoulders still but relaxed, not stiff.
- Repeat the inhaled yawn – vocalize as you exhale. Repeat again and vary the pitch as you vocalize.
- Repeat again, and count from 1 to 5 as you exhale, varying the pitch as you count.

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### Using the HMMMMMM

- Produce a gentle “hmmm” on an exhalation at a pitch that is comfortably positioned in the lower range. Repeat and change the hmm to “ahhh” halfway through the exhaled breath. Try to change nothing but the opening of the mouth. Maintain the same facial buzz with the “ahh” that was achieved with the hmmm.
- Experiment with the pitch. Produce while sweeping the pitch from high to low and then low to high.

### Straw Vocalizing

- After inhaling slowly on a yawn, exhale by blowing through a straw gently
- Repeat the inhaled yawn (not through the straw!) and vocalize as you blow out through the straw.
- Repeat again, and vary the pitch as you vocalize through the straw.

### Working the Breath Support System with “HUH!”

- After a slow deep inhalation, expel sharply by contracting the abdominal muscles hard with a loud “HUH!” The larynx and throat should stay relaxed and open. This is a difficult exercise and excellent focus must be maintained on separating the contractions of the abdominals with the maintenance of relaxed upper airway
- As you improve your ability to perform this correctly, increase the speed and repetitions of the expelled “HUH!”

### Lip Buzzing

- Put your lips loosely together and exhale by vibrating your lips like a motor boat. Make sure to keep your tongue relaxed as you exhale.
- Repeat the inhaled yawn, and vocalize as you trill your lips.
- Repeat again, and sweep up in pitch then back down. If this begins to tickle your lips and nose, then you’re doing it correctly.

### Low-Flow “HA-HA-HA”

- While monitoring your posture to maintain correct position and low, relaxed shoulder, inhale slowly and deeply (but be careful NOT to lock your shoulders at the top of the inhalation).
- On the exhaled breath, repeat “HA-HA-HA” slowly. There should be little expelled air with each HA. Place your palm in front of your lips to monitor the airflow. You should not feel much of a breeze!
- Experiment with varying the pitch as you repeat the exercise.

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### Tongue Trills

- Lightly place your tongue tip behind your upper teeth and exhale while vibrating your tongue tip in a trill.
- Repeat the inhaled yawn, and vocalize as you trill your tongue.
- Repeat again, and vary the pitch as you trill.

### Loosening the Jaw

- Monitor your posture to maintain easy balance and low, relaxed shoulders, ready for full lung expansion.
- Place your palms on the sides of your face and slowly massage the jaw and cheek muscles with slow small circular motions.
- Continue to massage and now lower and raise your jaw.
- Add sound – “mamamamamma” with a very light lip contact for the “m”.
- Change to “wawawawa” with very light lip round for a slightly distorted “w”.

### Two Octave Pitch Glide

- Inhale slowly on a yawn. Keep your shoulders low and relaxed.
- Vocalize gently and moderately softly using the “ee” vowel from moderately high chest voice to low chest voice, and then from head voice down through chest.
- Repeat a few times and then reverse direction, going from chest to head.
- Repeat using other vowels.

### The “Lessac” Call

- Keeping your jaw loose, call “Hello”, paying attention to the feel of the sound in your head and face. Change the word to more of H’lloooooo. Place the back of your hand a few inches from your mouth to feel the airflow. You should not feel much air flowing past your hand.
- Do not try to control the pitch. Do not force the breath to come out.
- Experiment with changing the pitch higher or lower as you repeat the exercise.
- Repeat using “hello”, “for me”, “today”, “be quiet”, “my name is .....

### Articulation Flexibility and Buzz

- Repeat Mumula Mumula Mumula Mumula Mumula Mumula Mumula Mumula
- Focus upon the buzz in the front of the face. As you repeat the word, change your focus first to the feel of your lips together, then after a few repetitions, focus upon your tongue touching the front palate for the “l” sound, then after another few repetitions, refocus to the easy jaw opening of the ending “ah” sound.
- Keep the air flowing easy; experiment with changing the pitch higher or lower as you repeat the exercise

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#### Using “Tongue Twisters” for Articulation Flexibility

There are many different “tongue twisters” that are good (and fun) to practice. The goal is to produce these phrases without extra tension in the articulators (tongue, lips, jaw) or the throat. All should be produced with good posture and full breath support. Start slowly, but make sure you are not using excessive muscle tension. Initially, do not try to control your pitch, but also make sure you do not get “locked in” to a narrow pitch range. As you warm up, experiment with varying the pitch. Experiment with different focus points – concentrating for a few repetitions on the tongue, then the lips, then the movement of the jaw.

Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers  
The tip of the tongue, the lips, the teeth  
The big, black-backed bumblebee  
Sally sells sea shells by the sea shore

Unique New York  
Really rural  
Red letter, yellow letter  
Teaching ghosts to sing

#### Extending Breath Support and Control – with a caveat!

Airflow must be controlled well by using the inspiratory and expiratory muscles as well as the muscles that control valving of the airflow at the level of the vocal folds. A popular exercise to improve this control is production of progressively longer phrases on one breath. While this is an excellent way to develop breath control, the exercise can easily be performed incorrectly, leading to habituation of improper breath management technique. A common error in performing these exercises is to “lock” the muscles of the abdomen, chest and throat in an effort to limit the airflow. While this strategy may enable the speaker to increase the number of phrases produced on one breath, it will most certainly train the use of excessive muscle contraction and tension throughout the entire voice production system. The result will be a voice with poor resonance and ultimately, vocal fatigue and impaired vocal stamina; a good reason to use a singing teacher, voice coach or voice therapist to help you learn to perform vocal warm-ups correctly!

With that warning, work on increasing the number of phrases that you can produce on one breath. Be very careful to monitor posture (Is the body relaxed and centered? Are the shoulders low? Is the chest ready for full expansion?) and position of the articulators (Are the jaw and tongue free of tension?)

Walk on a rainbow trail  
Walk on a trail of song  
And all about you will be beauty  
There is a way out of every dark mist, over a rainbow trail.

#### Navajo song

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How very commonly we hear it remarked  
that such and such thoughts are beyond the compass of words.  
I do not believe that any thought, properly so called,  
is out of the reach of language.  
For my own part, I have never had a thought  
which I could not set down in words,  
With ever more distinctness than that with which I conceived it.

**Edgar Allen Poe**

Morning air!  
If men will not drink of this at the fountainhead of the day,  
Then we must bottle up some and sell it in the shops,  
For the benefit of those who have lost their ticket to morning time in this world!

**Henry David Thoreau**

What a to-do to die today at a minute or two to two,  
a thing distinctly hard to say but harder still to do.  
for they'll beat a tattoo at a quarter to two:  
a rat-ta tat-tat ta tat-tat ta to-to.  
and the dragon will come when he hears the drum  
at a minute or two to two today, at a minute or two to two

**Lewis Carroll**