

How to Sing if you are Sick or Fatigued

As I sit here in my flu induced incapacitated state, I thought I might write an article detailing [how to sing when you are sick or not vocally 100%](#).

There have been many times in my life as a singer where I have had to sing while under the effects of a nasty flu or fatigue from a heavy vocal session the night before.

For most singers the first reaction to this situation is **PANIC!** This is a naturally reaction to such a situation. Negative thoughts immediately start to rush through your mind:

- "I'm going to embarrass myself"
- "If I cancel I will let so many people down"
- "I could damage my voice"
- "My reputation will be tarnished"

These are all thoughts that I have had myself over the years and they are all valid thoughts. However it doesn't have to be all doom and gloom. There are certain things you can do to give yourself the best chance to get through a performance with little to no evidence that you weren't at your best.

The First Question You Should Ask Yourself

How serious is it? Are your symptoms affecting your vocal ability or not? It is very possible to sing through a simple cold or virus. As long as your vocal cords aren't being affected, physically your voice and performance ability shouldn't change.

Let's say that your voice has been affected and you are finding it hard to sing, you have lost range and control. What then? Don't panic just yet.

Your first step is to go and see your Doctor. I know that sounds like a no-brainer but so many singers put this off until the last minute. If it's an infection to your sinus (like what I have right now!) throat or chest, the earlier you get on medication the quicker you will be back at your best.

Medication

There are many lozenges and remedies on the market that will relieve pain and inflammation. You need to keep away from anything that contains alcohol or menthol as they can dehydrate the voice and make it ever harder to sing. You also need to avoid anything with antiseptic in it. Yes antiseptic will numb the pain but it will also numb the control of your voice. What I suggest in the form of self medication is:

- [Non Alcoholic Lozenges](#)
- [A Quality Vocal Spray](#)
- [Honey and Lemon Drinks](#)

There are plenty of lozenges on the market which are singer friendly. I recommend [Slippery Elm Cherry Lozenges](#). If in doubt ask your pharmacist. A quality vocal spray is vital to replace saliva and relieve dryness in the throat. I use [Farleys Entertainers Secret Throat Relief Spray](#) which is readily available on the net. **Honey and lemon drinks** are great soothe the throat and clear the nasal cavity. Here is the recipe I use:

- [Squeeze 2 Lemons](#)
- [1 Tablespoon of Honey](#)
- [2 Dissolved Paracetamol Tablets](#)
- [1 Cup of Boiling Water](#)

Every 10% Helps

There isn't an instant miracle cure that is going to get your voice back to its brilliant best. There are however other things which I called the **10 percenters** that when combined can take you from the despair of being 40% vocally fit to a more manageable 80% vocal fitness. I have already discussed the use of self medication which will usually get you an extra 10%.

Steaming your voice is a great way to relieve swelling, dryness and nasal congestion. There are a few ways you can do this:

- [A Hot Shower \(with exhaust fan off\)](#)
- [The Pot and Towel Technique](#)
- [Steam Inhaler](#)
- [Humidifier](#)

A hot shower first thing in the morning with the exhaust fan off is a great way to get your voice heading in the right direction. By closing the room off and turning the exhaust fan off you will create a sauna effect which will add instant moisture to your throat and help clear your sinus. I always combine this with a gentle vocal warm up for an **instant 10% improvement to my voice**.

Throughout the day you should continue to steam your voice as it will help reduce any swelling in your throat and vocal cords. There are a few ways you can do this:

Have multiple **hot showers** throughout the day, which isn't the strategy I advise. Your family or housemates won't appreciate the lack of hot water at the end of the day, or the massive energy bill at the end of the month!

Use the Pot and Towel Technique. This involves boiling a pot of water and sitting with your head hovering over the steam. Placing a towel over your head and pot will keep the steam from escaping and create a mini sauna for your face.

My preferred steaming technique is the use of a **personal steam inhaler**. They are compact enough to take with you to your gig or dressing room and unlike the pot and towel technique you will isolate the steam to your throat and nose and not your entire face! I recommend [Mabis Healthcare Steam Inhaler](#)

A **humidifier** is a device which will add steam to a room. It is especially effective for use at night while you are sleeping. The moisture in the air will help to relieve waking up with a dry scratchy throat. I recommend [Vicks UV 99.999% Germ Free Humidifier](#)

Steaming your voice throughout the day and before a performance will help you gain an extra 10%.

The Importance of a Vocal Warm Up

Warming up your voice is always a good idea. When you are sick or fatigued it is **VITAL**. Not all warm ups are created equal. The vocal warm up routine that you would normally use when vocally fit will be too strenuous on your swollen and sore throat. There is a particular system of warming up that I use when I am sick.

- **Step One:** Gentle warm up to get the vocal cords vibrating. I do this in the shower first thing in the morning so that the steam helps wake the cords up. I do gentle hums and vocal fry to start, then some lip roll slides. All at low volume.
- **Step Two:** Maintain vocal silence until midday and repeat the gentle warm up with slightly increased volume. I will do this for 10 minutes.
- **Step Three:** 15 minute vocal warm up including lip rolls, vocal fry, and resonance exercises. I do this about 1 hour before I have to sing on stage, usually in a hot shower!

With the Full Day Vocal Warm Up I know that my voice will improve by 10% by performance time. It is important that you maintain vocal rest throughout the day. This will give your vocal cords time to rest and recover.

Watch What You Eat

Certain foods can have a positive and negative affect on your voice. You need to avoid foods which are going to cause a reaction in your throat. These include:

- [Spicy Foods](#)
- [Dairy Products](#)
- [Salty Products](#)

Spicy foods can cause acid reflux, which causes stomach acid to make its way up into your throat and effectively burning your vocal cords. Dairy products will create mucus in your throat. The coughing action required to get rid of it will irritate your cords. Salty products will dry out your throat.

Foods that will help you if you aren't feeling great include:

- [Fresh Fruit and Vegetables](#)
- [Unsalted Almonds](#)
- [Lean Meat](#)
- [Pasta](#)
- [Plenty of Water](#)

Fruit and vegetables are very high in water content. This will help your body stay hydrated. Almonds are a great source of energy as they are high in protein. Lean meat and pasta is also high in protein and carbohydrates. Singing can take a lot of energy so these foods will help you physically get through a performance. Water will contribute to the hydration of your throat and body.

By eating the right foods and drinking plenty of water you can gain an extra 10% to help you perform close to your best. If you drown your sorrows in the bad foods it will have you back at square one in no time!

So Let's Do The Math.

In isolation all of these suggestions can make a small improvement to your voice. If you do everything you can to get your voice to a reasonable singing state, most of the time you will get through a performance with no one even realising you are sick or fatigued.

- [Singer Safe Medication 10%](#)
- [Steaming Your Voice 10%](#)
- [Vocal Warm Up Routine 10%](#)

Eating and Drinking Right 10%

By combining the above strategies you can improve your incapacitated voice by up to 40%. **So even if you are only feeling 40 or 50% vocally fit it is possible to get to 80 - 90% which is certainly "performable".**

The Worst Case Scenario

There will be times when you have to face the fact that your voice isn't up to singing. This could be either prolonged vocal fatigued or a complete lack of voice caused by laryngitis. Sometimes you have to make tough decisions and you need to make them based on the long term ramifications rather than the short term.

Singing when you physically are not up to it can lead to long term problems. You can be scarred physically (vocal cord nodules) and mentally. What would you rather do:

Perform anyway and risk vocal damage and have your reputation as a quality singer tarnished.

OR

Cancel the performance and inconvenience few people.

I hope this article has given you some ideas on how to sing when you are sing or fatigued. These strategies have helped me through many inconvenient periods of illness when I have had to perform.

Singer's Survival Products:

[Thayer - Slippery Elm Lozenges](#)

[Farleys Entertainers Secret Throat Relief Spray](#)

[Mabis Healthcare Steam Inhaler](#)

[Vicks UV 99.999% Germ Free Humidifier](#)

I don't leave home without mine!

Ian Castle