

Singers with Colds – DOs & DON'Ts



“Keep your mucus membranes warm and wet” -says Dr Harris

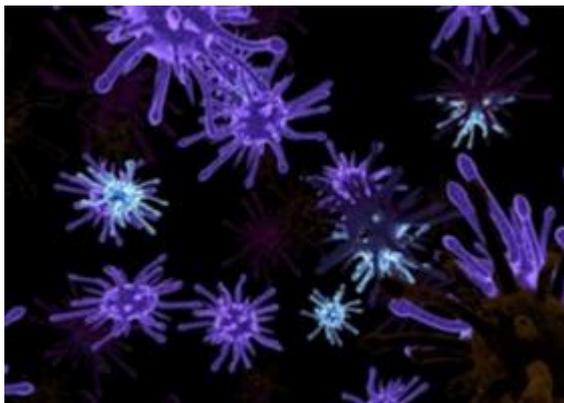
You feel the irritating tickle in your throat, the slight pressure in your sinuses and you notice that funny taste in your mouth.

There's no mistaking it.

You are coming down with a cold.

What's worse, you've got a performance in three days.

Ready to do anything to save your show, you rush to the pharmacy. There you find rows and rows of sprays, lozenges and pills for every symptom imaginable.



The common cold is caused by over 100 different constantly mutating virus strains

Which ones work? Which ones are good for singers? Which ones are bad for singers?

VoiceCouncil asked Dr Tom Harris, retired ENT surgeon, and one of London's most highly respected voice experts, what singers should

and shouldn't take when dealing with the range-shrinking, tone-wrecking evils of the common cold.

DO – Embrace Your Mucus

“There is nothing you can do to cure a cold,” says Harris, which is something no singer likes to hear.

But there is hope.

“The one thing you can do,” says Harris, “is keep your mucus membranes* warm and wet.”

Why? Because it will reduce irritation and help your body move the mucus out of your system. Keep in mind that your main goal is to get all that mucus *out*.

Ah, mucus. What a lovely topic, and one about which Dr Harris has a lot to say.

Did you know mucus is only gross when you are sick?

Normally, you don't even notice the 1 litre of mucus per day that your body generates to remove germs and debris from your body.

You and your mucus exist in perfect harmony.

When you get a cold, however, that mucus becomes dry, sticky and generally nasty.

Your best plan of attack is to keep that mucus as thin and watery as possible.

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Some things, such as drinking lots of water, help thin the mucus, while other things dry it out, making it thick and sticky.

DON'T – Dry & Suppress

Despite the temporary relief provided by decongestants** and antihistamines***, Dr Harris recommends against taking these because of their drying effect.

Dried out mucus membranes not only hinder your ability to sound good when you sing, but singing when the mucosa lining is dry makes it more likely that you will further irritate the vocal folds.

The drying effect makes your mucus sticky and slows down the body's ability to expel it. Drying out already inflamed mucus membranes hinders your ability to fight off a cold.

Dr Harris notes that when the problem is due to allergic reactions or asthma, however, antihistamines *are* helpful but singers must use them with careful awareness of the drying effect.

Got a cough? Another no-no is a cough suppressant****. Harris explains that coughing (when it's wet and phlegmy) is how you get mucus out (which helps you get better).

You could risk a lung infection if you let that mucus and all the germs it harbours sit there in your lungs.

For the sake of your long-term health, you really don't want to suppress a productive cough.



Suppressing a productive cough will only trap the virus in your lungs and risk infection

Can't sleep? If the cough keeps you up at night, try getting out of bed, making a hot cup of tea and be sure to inhale the steam as you sip it.

A dry cough is another matter – it does not move mucus, and you should talk to your doctor if it persists (in this case, a cough suppressant *may* be desirable).

DO – Soothe Your Symptoms

There isn't anything that cures colds, but among the masses of products on the pharmacy shelf, there are a couple that can help.

"First Defence nasal spray is an example of a product that may help you feel better," says Harris, who says it is safe for singers.

If you check the ingredients, you'll see the first is water. No problem there. Then it contains things like Hydroxypropyl methylcellulose, which coats your irritated mucus membrane thereby trapping and physically limiting the spread of virus particles.

It is slightly alkaline and has Phenethyl alcohol which is moderately virucidal and so reduces the chance of the virus attacking you with a second wave of awfulness.

Finally, it contains menthol, which makes the mucus membranes feel cooler, which your brain interprets as an open airway. First Defence is only useful if taken in the very early stages of a cold. It doesn't help much if you start a couple of days after the onset of symptoms.

While First Defence is widely available in the UK, it is not sold in the U.S.A. or Australia. In the authors opinion, this is due to commercial / political considerations rather than for scientific or medical reasons. You can order it on Amazon.com or many other perfectly legitimate sources on the web if it is not locally available over the counter near you.

DO – Steam

Any or all of the mucus membranes lining your airways become irritated and inflamed when you have a cold virus (your vocal folds are covered by this mucus membrane, which means the sound of your voice is usually affected too).

Regular steam inhalation is generally safer and more effective than self-treating with over-the-counter remedies

Inhaling steam immediately relieves this swelling. “Regular steam inhalation is generally safer and more effective,” says Harris, “than self-treating with most over-the-counter remedies.”

Dr Harris has found that it is best to inhale steam at least twice a day to relieve an irritated voice.

“The physical methods like steam are the most effective, and come without side effects,” says Dr Harris, “All drugs have potential side effects.”

An electric steamer is essentially a kettle with a long face mask. The advantage of these is that they make the best sort of steam – the water droplet is the ideal size.

If you don't have one of these, you can settle for a bowl of boiling water and a towel over your head.

There are ultra-sonic steam generators on the market, but they come with a potential risk.

Since the water droplet produced in the vapor is smaller than that of steam and when inhaled right down into the chest a higher proportion of the vapour is absorbed by the lungs.

Overindulgence in ultrasonic vapor is not going to help the cold.

Do, Do, Do!

Are you coming down with a cold right now? Yes? Then your mission

is to get that mucus out.

That's right.

Go and blow your nose gently (one side at a time). Drink water to

help keep that mucus thin and wet. Keep it moving by avoiding cough suppressants, decongestants and antihistamines. Keep your mucus membranes with steam and the safe nasal

sprays like First Defence to reduce the swelling and irritation.

Keep yourself warm (hot drinks are great for this) so your body can

function as well as possible to rid itself of that nasty stuff that is

holding your voice hostage.



*Retired Consultant ENT Surgeon **Tom Harris** opened one of the first Multidisciplinary Voice Clinics in Britain at the Radcliffe Infirmary, Oxford in 1982. Until recently, he ran the Sidcup and University Hospital Lewisham Voice Clinics with Sara Harris, (Speech Therapist) Jacob Lieberman (Osteopath and Psychotherapist) and Dinah Harris (Voice Coach).*

He was the Founding Chairman of The Voice Research Society, the predecessor of The British Voice Association, of which he has also been President. He is the principal editor and contributor to The Voice Clinic Handbook.

** Mucus membranes are the surface lining of your mouth, nostrils and throat. The mucus membrane also covers your vocal folds – it does most of the vibrating when you sing. Mucus membranes serve an important function in your body's defence against germs.*

*** Examples of medicines containing decongestants are Otrivine, Sudafed and Benylin. Decongestant medicines can come in the form of pills, sprays and drops. You know it is a decongestant if the ingredients include any one of the following: **oxymetazoline, phenylephrine, xylometazoline** or **pseudoephedrine**.*

**** Examples of medicines containing antihistamines are Reactine, Dimotapp Cold and Allergy, Benadryl Allergy, Nytol, Claritin, Vicks NyQuil, Alka-Seltzer Plus Night Time Cold Medicine. Antihistamines come in the form of pills, gels, lotions and nasal sprays. You know it is an antihistamine, if the ingredients include any of the following: **diphenhydramine, chlorpheniramine, loratadine** or **cetirizine**.*

***** Examples of medicines containing cough suppressants are Pulmo Bailly, Buxley's Mixture Cough Suppressant, Benylin DM, Vicks Dayquil Cough. Cough suppressants can come in the form of pills or liquid. You know it is a cough suppressant if the ingredients contain antitussives such as: **codeine, dextromethorphan** or **noscapine**.*