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Physical Therapy for Singers
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When you think about exercises for musicians, you think about guitarists who need to keep their hands in top condition or fiddle players who may end up having back problems due to positioning. But what about those who sing? Do singers and other vocal performers need exercises beyond those that warm up their vocal cords?

It may not seem like it, but body-centered exercise and even physical therapy can help you keep your voice in top shape and may help you become a stronger singer. One study even found that physical therapy and other body-centered exercises can contribute to improved alignment, posture and core strength, all of which create a smoother, more dynamic voice with an extended pitch range.¹

Unless you are trying to address a specific problem with physical therapy, however, many exercises that can help singers are less concrete or are instead physical activities. These exercises assist in strengthening your core or help you increase your breath control and capacity.

1. **Strengthen Your Core**

Any exercise that helps strengthen your core will help with your breath control.

These includes sit-ups, push-ups, planks, fitness classes and yoga. It is important to note, however, that your aim is not to acquire a six pack, but to *tone* your stomach muscles, so you have more strength to guide and release air and manipulate your diaphragm. Too-taut stomach muscles will inhibit optimum air flow.

2. **Pay Attention to Posture**

You may have heard this over and over again, especially if you take voice lessons—remember your posture! However, are you practicing the correct posture? Yes, you still want to stand tall, as though an invisible string were holding you up through the top of your head, to use an old maxim. However, today's physical therapists are

¹ Phillip F. et al. "Physical Therapy as a Means to Optimize Posture and Voice Parameters in Student Classical Singers: A Case Report." *Journal of Voice*. October 2009, 91-101.

moving away from the idea that you should hold your shoulders back and thrust your chest forward, a stance that can actually lead to back pain. Instead, the idea is to have a neutral spine with your shoulders neither held back nor hunched forward. Use your lower abs to bring your pelvis forward, tuck your tailbone slightly, loosen your knees and lean slightly forward so that the weight on your feet is mostly distributed evenly with a bit more on the balls of your feet.

Many of us hunch, lock our knees and lean back without noticing it, which leads to back and knee pain as well as poor airflow and support.

3. **Practice the Hissing Exercise**

This exercise helps tone your diaphragm and core while increasing your lung capacity. Standing correctly, take a deep, correct breath, then release your breath in a steady hiss for at least a slow 12 count or until your breath is gone. Once that becomes easy, move to a staccato hiss, punctuating quarter notes with pulses from your diaphragm, then 8th notes, triplets, and end with 16th notes, moving on as each becomes easy.

4. **Pay Attention to Throat and Jaw Tension**

Throat and jaw tension, as well as tension in your shoulders and tongue, can impact your ability to achieve proper placement, which could, in turn, wreak havoc on both your voice and your air flow. It can also dry out your throat and vocal folds, narrow your airway and create irritation in your throat. ²

Tension is often chronic, and the best way to counteract throat tension is to “establish a regular, relaxed breathing pattern.”³ It may seem too simplistic, but combating tension when you are not singing, learning to relax through methods such as meditation, yoga, and deep breathing exercises can help you relax when you sing and ease the tension that affects your voice.

5. **Expand the Range of Motion in Your Rib Cage**

² Claudia Friedlander. “Musings on Mechanics: Breathing Between the Lines.” *Classical Singer*. December 14, 2014, 16-18.

³ *Ibid.*, 17

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Another problem you may encounter is not being able to expand your rib cage enough to take a truly effective breath. Dancers and singers are taught to stand with an elevated rib cage, and many of us hold in our stomachs for aesthetic reasons, but this can stifle a correct, full breath. Here are two simple exercises you can use to help expand the range of motion of your rib cage:

- a. Lie back against a foam roller placed just under your shoulder blades, arms stretched above your head, knees bent and feet flat on the floor to provide stability. Stay in this position as long as is comfortable.
- b. Lie on top of a stability ball on your stomach, legs stretched in back of you and arms in front of you, palms on the floor to keep you stable. Stay in this position as long as is comfortable.

You will begin to feel your rib cage and back relax and stretch, which will, in turn, allow for greater expansion.⁴

The above activities can help promote greater breath control and capacity, which can do wonders for your voice in multiple ways. I even use them myself! I am a writer, however, not a doctor, and as always, it is best to consult a professional before starting any exercise routine or to consult with a doctor for any specific problems. With practice and patience, however, you can protect and expand your air and propel your voice to new heights!

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⁴ Ibid., 17