



Clearing the Mask

by Kevin M Reese



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Oh-oh, you have a performance coming up soon– but your nose is all stuffed up and it feels like your vocal cords are full of gunk, keeping you from being in tip-top shape. The best medicine is prevention, but it may not be too late to help with even tonight’s performance. Using common sense and developing a proper regimen for every-day vocal health is the best way to ward off such days, but even the most conscientious actor can be overwhelmed by mucous in the “mask” area (the resonance areas of the forehead, cheeks, eyes and nose).

These tips are the result of my 8 years as a member of a professional touring children’s theatre company. We had to be ready to perform 2-3 shows per day, 5-6 days per week for six months. Cancelling a performance due to actor sickness was never an option – the show must go on! I personally relied on these very methods to keep my voice ready to perform. Everyone’s body and voice are different and react to different methods. Lots of trial and experimentation will be required for you to find what works best for you. (I offer a 30-minute classroom workshop that illustrates the information/techniques described here– I even provide the tissues.)

EXPELLING MUCOUS (spit out mouth or blow out nose, don’t swallow). It’s gross – but necessary.

Get used to coughing gunk up and spitting or blowing it out.

MUCOUS - Mucus is made up of mucins, salts, electrolytes, etc., and is normally clear and very helpful to the body’s function because it lubricates and keeps parts of the body from drying out. The problem occurs when thicker, excess mucus is produced that does not allow the sinuses to drain properly. When mucus turns any color other than clear, it usually indicates a problem. When irritants such as mold, smoke or pet dander are inhaled, they become trapped in the mucus and continue the irritation, producing even more mucous (that is why nasal rinse/irrigation is suggested).

PHLEGM - Phlegm is a type of mucous produced in the breathing organs (lungs, bronchial tubes, etc) – but not the nose. It contains the same chemicals as does mucous– but also has anti-virus and anti-bacteria substances. It is very thick and sticky so it can stay where it is needed. It fights infection, then breaks up and moves along cilia to the throat for expelling, full of dead germs, viruses and bacteria (that’s why you shouldn’t swallow it).

VIBRATION

The only way to naturally (without medication) get rid of excess mucous and phlegm is to provide vibration to the mask area in order to loosen it up and expel. Combining two or more of the methods below will give greater benefit. Find what combination works best for you.

1. **BOUNCE** - letting gravity help. Bounce up and down on the balls of your feet or use your knees for greater force. Depending upon the location of the mucous, this may help move it to better position for expelling.
2. **HUM** - Gently hum up and down your range, finding the pitches that resonate your mask the most, then concentrating on those pitches. This helps clear your sinuses as well as clear any excess mucous and phlegm from around your vocal cords. The main objective is not to vocalize a pleasing tone – merely to provide sonic vibration.
3. **SHAKE** - Shake your head quickly back and forth (as in saying “no”). Careful to not get too wild or you may hurt your neck. As you shake, try different angles of your head (look up, look down, tilt side-to-side, etc).
4. **TAP** - using your fingertips, tap all around the sinus areas of your mask. For more force, you can use the heel of your palm, being careful not to bruise. Also, scrunch up your nose and use your fingertips to massage your facial skin around your cheeks, nose and forehead.
5. **VIBRATING DEVICE** - You may find an external device that can be applied to your throat and/or mask that provides sufficient vibration. Back massagers, personal vibrators, washing machines....

MUCOUS-PRODUCING FOOD TO AVOID DAY OF PERFORMANCE

All Milk/dairy products (including yogurt, cheese, ice cream, etc) - although milk has not been shown to increase phlegm or mucous production, it does thicken the existing phlegm, mucous, and saliva which can compound problems.

Sugary products (desserts, candy, pop, etc).

Salty products (chips, salty nuts, crackers, and pretzels, etc) Salt is a diuretic (dries you out).

Soybean products - check labels, soy is in more products than you think.

Breads (gluten and casein are the offenders)

Caffeine, energy drinks and gatorade-type drinks.

Chocolate

Proteins - meat, fish, fowl, etc.

MUCOUS-REDUCING FOOD TO EAT

Hot vegetable soup

Fruits high in Vitamin C (pineapple, orange, grapefruit, blueberries, pomegranates, etc).

Fresh green vegetables (particularly asparagus, onions, cauliflower, celery and garlic).

Steamed rice

Spices - Ginger, hot peppers, and pepper.

Hot Herbal teas (non-caffeinated)

NASAL RINSE/IRRIGATION

- Gravity type (Teacup style, non-forced, saline solution just drains through from one side out the other) - best for everyday maintenance.
- Pressure type (Squirt style, forces saline solution through) - when you're more congested than usual.
- Cost \$10-20 at most pharmacies and Walmart. You can easily make your own saline solution.

HYDRATION

- General rule: eight 8-oz glasses of water per day, spread out evenly over the day. Drink enough water that urine is clear and odorless unless you're taking mega B-vitamins.
- Plain ol' water is best. Avoid caffeine, energy drinks and gatorade-type drinks, and alcohol.
- Room temperature is best (or tap water) - avoid ice water.
- Avoid straight lemon juice - a small amount (1 Tbs) is okay for flavoring water. To drink straight lemon juice strips the mucous from the throat and vocal cords. Some mucous is necessary for proper vocal cord lubrication.

USE HUMIDIFIER

- Cool Steam type is great.
- If using hot steam, be careful that it's not too hot (particularly if you are leaning directly over humidifier with a towel) because it may hamper action of cilia (little hairs in throat, sinus and nose that help move mucous and clear away microscopic debris).
- Add eucalyptus oil or Vick's to water.
- Of course, if you live in an extra-humid area, forego humidifier use as it may cause mold spores.

MEDICATION - Last resort

- Mucinex - loosens phlegm for easier expelling (coughing up, spitting out), without drying you out.
- Prescription sinus/allergy medication - your doctor can prescribe proper medication for singers.
- Most OTC sinus/allergy medication cause more vocal problems than help because it mostly dries you out and hampers expelling.

TYPICAL MORNING ROUTINE

1. Use humidifier while sleeping
2. Wake up
3. Drink 8-12 oz water
4. Start hot shower, develop steam before entering
5. Shower - wash (hum)
6. Set water temp as hot as you can stand COMFORTABLY
7. Direct spray over top of head 1-2 minutes (bounce, hum, shake, tap)
8. Direct spray over back of head/upper neck 1-2 minutes (bounce, hum, shake, tap)
9. Direct spray over facial mask (forehead, eyes, cheeks, nose) - 1-2 minutes (hum)
10. Bounce, Hum, Shake, Tap as needed
11. Spit and/or blow as needed
12. Nasal Irrigation (can be done at sink after shower) - wait at least an hour afterwards before having to sing because of residual drainage.

LIFESTYLE CHANGES - are required for those who take their instrument (their voice/body/mind) seriously. These tips and suggestions are offered with the assumption that your general health is good. If you have vocal nodes, sinus or viral infection, or any other acute or chronic state that affects your health and voice, you will most likely need to get those taken care of before these suggestions will be helpful. Please consult with a doctor. Probably the most important change you will ever make is adopting a lifestyle that keeps your vocal health in mind with every decision you make.

- Keep warm - Cold weather can trigger mucous production. Wear coats, hats, and scarves as needed. About the worst thing you can do is go outside in chilly weather—even for a moment—without proper apparel because as soon as the cold hits your body, it begins producing more mucous as a defense mechanism.
- Hydrate - most people suffer from chronic dehydration without even knowing it.
- Don't yell, scream, or laugh overly loud—especially in cold weather.
- Get plenty of sleep (8 hours). Your body/voice is more affected by the quality of sleep you received two nights ago than it is by last night's sleep (assuming you weren't up all night).
- Visit your doctor if thick, colored mucous (sign of infection) appears within two weeks of a performance in case you need to be put on antibiotics. Make sure your doctor is aware you are a performer so s/he makes choices based on your unique situation. Be sure to take ALL of the medication as prescribed.
- Chewing gum produces saliva, which naturally hydrates your vocal cords.
- Sucking on non-numbing throat lozenges helps coat the back of the throat (cough suppressant action).
- Vibration - Use an external vibrator to stimulate/relax your throat, neck, lower jaw and mask areas.
- Vocalize/warm up before every rehearsal and performance. Your vocal cords are really only 25% of your singing apparatus, the other 75% is the support system (your throat/mask/body). Healthy vocal cords are always ready—they are not muscles, so they never really need “warming up.” The important part of warming up is to get the rest of your body ready to provide the needed support for your vocal cords' optimal performance. Vocalization exercises assure that excess mucous is not in the way and that your breath support system (body) is in proper working order.
- Find out what works for YOU. Everyone's body is different and reacts differently to different things. Diligently search out the best routine for yourself and follow it religiously.

TO A PERFORMER WHO TAKES HIS/HER WORK SERIOUSLY,
DEATH IS THE ONLY ACCEPTABLE EXCUSE FOR NOT BEING READY TO PERFORM.