

A Vocal Health Survey Among Amateur and Professional Voice Users

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Summary: An international survey was conducted to provide insights into current practices related to vocal health among amateur and professional voice users. Vocalists of various genres completed an online survey related to their practice in seeking medical care for vocal health concerns, and their preferences for the type of medical help they seek. Specific vocal symptoms or conditions which the subjects feel would warrant evaluation was also queried, as well as their preference for voice use and management should laryngeal pathology be diagnosed during a medical examination. Participants were knowledgeable in both traditional and alternative medical approaches but showed a preference for those options most readily available, as opposed to those best suited for a vocal issue. Ideally, a combination of traditional and alternative management would appear to be the best long-term strategy for professional and amateur voice users.

Key Words: Vocal health–Vocal health management–Dysphonia–Complementary medicine–Voice Users.

INTRODUCTION

Appropriate care and management of professional voices in today's health care system continues to remain controversial. Although many professional voice users are aware of the risks associated with continued use of an injured laryngeal mechanism, many are unlikely to seek medical attention because of a variety of reasons, including lack of insurance, fear of results, and lack of knowledge on where to seek appropriate care. A past survey¹ found 39% of subjects may not seek medical attention for a voice problem because of a lack of medical coverage. Another survey of self-reported voice problems² reported that 69.2% of singers reported vocal problems in the past 12 months, compared with 41.5% of non-singers. Based on these and other findings, a survey was designed to better understand current rationales to seek or not seek medical evaluation among voice users to provide insights into current practices related to the management of their vocal health.

Purpose of study

The purpose of this study was to better understand the reasons amateur and professional voice users seek medical attention for vocal health issues. Amateur and professional voice users from various vocal genres completed a survey related to their decisions for seeking an evaluation. Evaluation options included a traditional medical evaluation with a laryngologist, advice from an alternative medical professional, or a combination of these

options. The survey also queried symptoms that would lead the participant to seek such intervention or advice.

Traditional medical and alternative therapy resources are widely available for vocal health management. However, just one study was found¹ with specific data related to insurance issues. Of the topics covered by previous surveys, vocal health is covered the most extensively by previous studies,^{1–4} although there is a need for more data regarding the specific vocal health of amateur and professional voice users.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

Subjects were solicited via survey links to professional vocal arts organizations and sites related to voice use for both amateur and professionals. Voice users from various backgrounds completed the online survey related to their practice in seeking medical care for vocal health concerns, with a specific focus on current preference for traditional means (laryngology/speech language pathology), alternative medical care (homeopathic, Eastern medical approaches, nonmedical), or a combination of these options. Vocal symptoms or conditions experienced by respondents that warranted evaluation were also queried, as well as the subjects' preference for voice use and management for diagnosed laryngeal pathologies. The survey consisted of 31 multipart questions, covering four major areas, and included information on demographics, vocal health, past and present dysphonia, vocal pathologies, if any, and extent of voice use demands.

The survey was posted online for websites of the National Association of Teachers of Singing, the American Choral Directors Association, Actors Equity Association, Music Teachers National Association, National Association for Music Education, and alumni of opera programs, and on Facebook pages of voice users.

Surveys were collected from 25 different countries on six different continents including Australia, Asia, Africa, Europe, South America, and North America. Participants did not receive payment for their participation. This study, under the supervision of The Catholic University of America, received a Certificate of Exemption from the Secretary of the Institutional Review Board for Research with Human Subjects.

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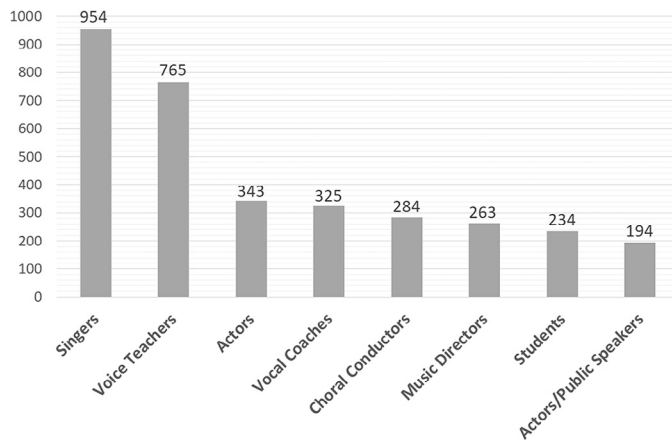


FIGURE 1. Respondents' reported voice use.

RESULTS

Demographics

Of the 1195 respondents of this survey, the largest group of voice users were singers at nearly 80%, followed by voice teachers, who were 65% of the respondents. Many respondents selected multiple types of voice use (Figure 1) and were members of national and international organizations and unions that include and relate to voice users. The average age of respondents was 40-49 years old, with an average length of performing experience of 20 years. Those who perform on a regular basis comprised 95% of respondents. When we asked about knowledge of voice medicine (Figure 2), defined as, "vocal health, hygiene, surgery, and clinical practice," an overwhelming 81% of respondents indicated they were at least somewhat familiar with voice medicine.

Vocal health

Ninety-three percent of respondents completed the vocal health section of the survey. The most commonly reported vocal symptom (present or past) was muscle tension, with 55% of respondents having experienced or were experiencing this issue, followed by 49% having experienced voice loss (Figure 3). These findings support previous research in which 64% of teachers of singing reported past vocal problems, compared with 33% of control subjects.³ Sixty-nine percent of singers reported vocal

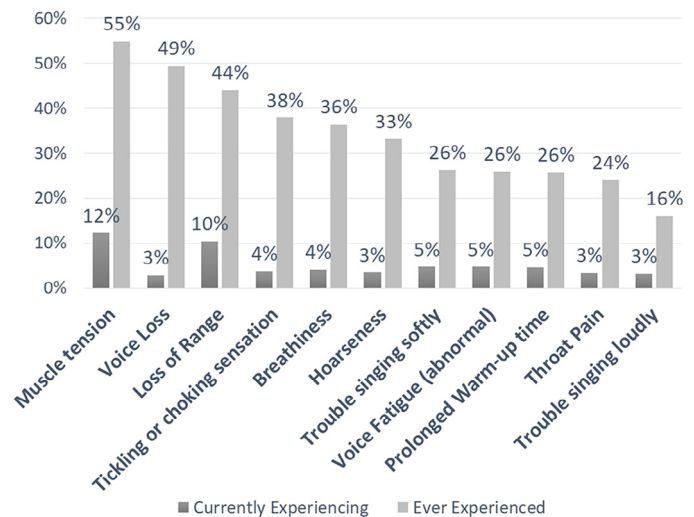


FIGURE 3. Vocal health symptoms experienced by respondents.

problems over the past 12 months, compared with 46% of non-singers having reported vocal problems.² Fifty-six percent of young choral singers experienced vocal difficulty.⁵ The results of this survey and those referenced emphasize the need for more consistent, broad-ranging awareness and training of vocal health care and management for voice teachers, coaches, as well as amateur and professional voice users.

Length of time before seeking medical help

Survey respondents were asked how long they experienced vocal symptoms before seeking medical help, as well as which symptoms lead to their decision to seek help, and which symptoms did not compel them to seek assistance (Figure 4). A total of 24% of respondents reported they did not seek medical assistance at all for vocal symptoms; 11% waited 1 to 2 days; 25% sought assistance within 1 week; 19% within 2 weeks; 6% within 3 weeks; 8% waited 4 weeks; and 7% waited more than 4 weeks.

Alternatively, respondents were asked the reasons Fig they did not seek medical assistance in the past for a vocal symptom (Figure 5). The highest percentage of responses at 38% for not seeking help was because the symptom went away, and 29% of respondents did not seek help for a vocal symptom because they

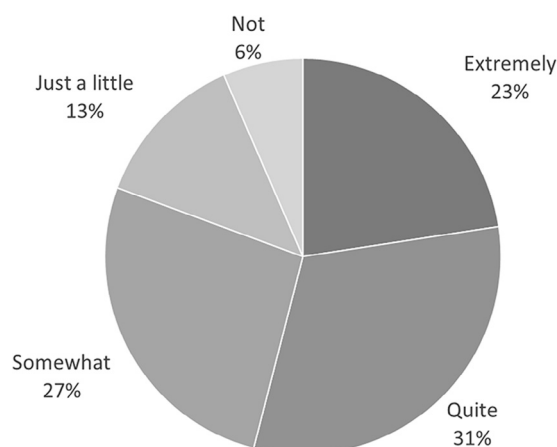


FIGURE 2. Knowledge of voice medicine as reported by respondents.

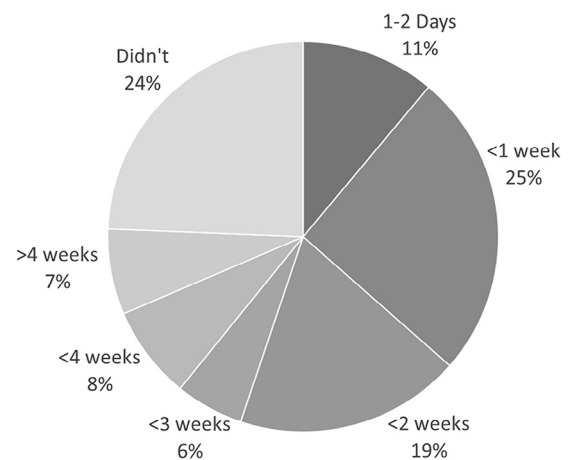


FIGURE 4. Time to seek help.

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