

Ep #6: Vocal Remedies that Really Work

Can't
wait
to hear
you
with
Michèle Voillequé

Full Episode Transcript

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Your voice is unique to you. It grows as you grow. It changes as you change. If you're curious about the relationship between your voice and your body, your heart and your mind, welcome. My name is Michèle Voillequé and I can't wait to hear you.

Today's episode is about vocal remedies that really work, and if you get squeamish when the conversation turns to bodily fluids, this might be an episode you want to skip.

I've written about vocal remedies and my experience with COVID-19 and what to do when you're phlegmy, on my website, and I'll put those links in the show notes, along with a link to a pamphlet from Duke University Voice Center about vocal hygiene, which includes a ton of really useful information about if your voice is bothering you, what might be wrong with it, and a whole list of remedies that have been scientifically proven to work, to help with different things. I just can't recommend it highly enough. It's like a really good doctor's visit, all contained in a PDF. So that's in the show notes, too.

An old voice teacher of mine used to say, “Phlegm is your friend,” whenever I would complain about phlegm. And he's right, to a point.

So your vocal folds are two sets of muscles, one on either side of your throat, and on top of the muscle are three layers of mucosa. So phlegm is the lubricant that helps them vibrate well together. Without phlegm, the voice wouldn't work at all.

So, phlegm is your friend, because without phlegm, we don't get to make sound. But then, phlegm, you know, there can be a lot of it, and it can be thick, and chunky, and icky. And also, it can get too thin and produce a chronic cough, you know, that you just can't seem to shake. So, phlegm

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is your friend, but it's like Goldilocks, you know – not too much, not too little, just, just right.

So what I've found for myself as somebody who uses their voice a lot, what's helpful for me is I make it a daily habit to drink a lot of water. There's just no overstating the importance of good hydration. I know it's tedious. I know it's like, it's like advice you always get, you know, and it's just like, “Oh, I don't want to hear that. I don't want to hear that the solution is to be well hydrated.”

Unfortunately, really, the solution is to be well hydrated. So for me, that looks like drinking a lot of warm, un-caffeinated liquid all day. I have a favorite Yeti tumbler that holds 16 ounces. And I think I'm drinking four, between four and five of those a day. And that feels like it really works for me. I notice when I drink less and my life is not better.

Another thing that I make a habit of is eating an apple, not because Benjamin Franklin told us to, although that's a very good reason, uh, but because it has maybe why he told us to is because apples have pectin in them, and pectin helps cut through the phlegm.

And over the last couple of years or so, I've started to notice in my apple eating, if I'm having a really awful, terrible, phlegmy day, and I'm really grumpy, if I think back, it's usually been a week or two since I've had an apple.

I don't notice the beautiful phlegm-balanced days when I am eating an apple. I just notice that if I'm having a terrible day, it – I probably haven't eaten an apple in a while. So I offer that to you.

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I eat Granny Smith apples because they're the ones that my system tolerates the best. I have a lot of sensitivities, allergy things. So, I'm a special duck in that regard. But I think, you know, any apple will do.

Somebody somewhere has probably looked at the amount of pectin in the various apples if you really want to geek out on it. But I don't have a link for you about that.

When I'm feeling under the weather and just not good, there are two things I typically go to first.

One is squeezing the juice of half a lemon into my 16 ounce tumbler of hot water and drinking it, maybe with a little bit of honey, but often not, often just lemon and water. And that will help cut through the phlegm. You may know already that citric acid is an astringent cleaner. You can clean your windows with a lemon if you want and it works.

So one of the things that happens with me when I get too much lemon is my voice can start to feel “squeaky clean.” It can clear up too much of the phlegm, and then I feel like wait, I needed some, I need some of that back. But usually one 16 ounce tumbler of, of lemon and water will serve me pretty well. That can get me back on track.

Another thing that I love, that I honestly can't get enough of, I just don't make it that often, is homemade ginger tea. Homemade ginger tea is even better when somebody else makes it for you. I've tried the ginger tea that, that's dried, and that makes me feel terrible. My system does not respond well to that at all.

But, take a couple of inches of fresh ginger root, slice it up, put it in a saucepan with a quart of water. I boil it down until there's about half that

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amount of water left, and the liquid is a brown color that doesn't look at all appetizing, and the house smells like ginger. That's usually about the time it's about perfect.

And depending on the ginger, how fresh it was or where it came from, and I haven't figured this out either, the tea that I've made may be too spicy to drink or it might be just about perfect.

And if it's too spicy to drink, you can just dilute it with some regular hot water, which I, I do. Uh, and I, I have the ginger tea often just straight or with a little bit of honey, or if I'm feeling a little phlegmy, I can put a little bit of lemon in it, and it's just magically wonderful.

If you live in a place that has Asian supermarkets, you can buy lemon, honey lemon tea and honey ginger tea already in a jar and just take a tablespoon and add it to a cup of water and it's, you're good to go. It's really good. It's really convenient, especially if you're honestly sick and you don't have any energy to do anything.

When I had COVID, I went through a whole jar of I don't remember if it was lemon or ginger or I got both. I think I probably went with ginger. Anyway, I went through a jar of it, and it was really what I needed – that was all the effort I was up for at that moment, those moments. It was a long recovery.

There's another tea called "opera tea" that I learned about 20 years ago or so, and I don't make it because it's a lot of effort. Uh, well, is it a lot? It's not a lot of effort. It just, uh, it feels like it.

So it's the juice of half a lemon in hot water, add as much cayenne pepper as you can stand, and then enough honey or maple syrup to make

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it drinkable. And the idea is that you sip it throughout the day. I think what I don't like about opera tea is the “sip throughout the day” part.

But it does what the ginger does, the cayenne really opens up your sinuses and gets things moving. Both the ginger and cayenne pepper increase your saliva production so that changes the water balance in your system and loosens up the phlegm. And the lemon cleans it up, and the honey is soothing to the throat. Not so sure if maple syrup has been clinically proven to be just as soothing as honey, but it's also a tasty option.

Does that sound tasty to you, lemon, cayenne, honey, or maple syrup? I don't know. It might appeal to you, or it, it might just sound disgusting.

One of the things that I've found about my voice and I'm trying to remedy it in one way or another, is that usually my taste buds tell me what I need. Like, I've on more than one occasion made myself some lemon water and taken a sip of it and was like, “Oh, nope, wrong. That's not what I want.”

Or, you know, ginger tea, it just, it doesn't sound good. You know, intellectually I know this might be a moment for ginger tea, but when I think about it for a second, it's like, “No, that's not right.” So I would encourage you to trust your taste buds, trust your system to know what it needs to help things along.

I have a favorite licorice tea. Licorice is super soothing to the voice, and you'll find that licorice is an ingredient in the Throat Coat, tea and, I don't know, Traditional Medicinals. I can't remember the other brand that's really common.

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If there's a throat tea, it's going to have licorice in it and my favorite licorice tea was just plain licorice tea. I haven't been able to find for a while. Um, this is 2023. I think I haven't seen it in my store for maybe over a year. And it's Egyptian licorice tea from the Yogi Tea Company. Just amazing. Really soothing, really tasty, and just great.

Because it's licorice, uh, you shouldn't drink ton of it, you know, like you shouldn't have just tons of licorice tea every day because it's not so good – I forget either for your liver or your kidneys – but in moderation, it's really great and soothing for the voice, and you're certainly not going to OD on it by drinking yourself through a box of Throat Coat tea when you're sick.

In 2016, the Journal of Singing did a literature review on vocal remedies to see what, you know, was actually scientifically effective. And so these are ingredients that you want to look for when you're in the supermarket looking at teas, um, what might be helpful for you.

So, licorice root, slippery elm bark, marshmallow root, ginger, horseradish, thyme, and cayenne pepper. That's their list of effective ingredients.

And again, look at the Duke University PDF for a list of things that you can buy that are that are useful. I don't know if, I don't remember if Duke University's information is as crunchy granola as this, you know, list of natural ingredients that I've just given you, but the Journal of Singing article that mentioned these, their, their literature review, is taken from, uh, testing done in Germany on the efficacy of herbal medicines or medicines with herbal ingredients.

In the United States, our FDA doesn't make a statement one way or another about herbal remedies. But in Germany, there is a commission

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dedicated to testing for efficacy. And so that's what they found. And I'll just say them again. So we've got licorice root, slippery elm bark...

there used to be some wonderful slippery elm lozenges that I don't think are being made anymore, which is really too bad, but maybe somebody else will fill in the gap.

...marshmallow root, ginger root, horseradish, thyme, and cayenne pepper.

So those are the things that I actually do in my daily, almost daily life that are really helpful for managing phlegm, managing dryness, feeling good, keeping myself together.

When I had COVID-19, I tested positive on a Tuesday and on the Sunday I had sung at a church service, wearing an N95 mask, but around around a very vulnerable population. And I tested positive and my first thought, honestly, was, "Oh my God, who did I just kill?"

I was beside myself.

And the first thing I did was go to the UCSF, uh, study website to see if there was a medical study that I could participate in now that I had COVID. So that at least if I, at least if I had unwittingly infected anybody, I could somehow right the moral scales of the universe.

Anyway, I did find a study and it was about whether gargling with mouthwash could reduce the symptoms of COVID-19 and I signed up for it.

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And the next morning got an email saying that the study was already full and they weren't accepting new participants, but could I be of any help? was the message.

And so I ended up talking to one of the lead researchers of the study, and she very generously spent an hour on the phone with me and walked me through their protocols and what they were looking at and really impressed upon me the importance of giving it a try, even though I'm not in the study. She said here, try this protocol because it happened to really work for her when she had COVID just a few months prior.

You can read more about this on my website, and there's a link to the study, and there should be results coming out. Well, you know, research takes a while. But what I ended up doing, they were, the study involved, uh, they were looking at four different mouthwashes to figure out which was most effective at reducing symptoms of COVID-19.

And I chose Listerine Zero because it didn't have any alcohol in it. And it seemed like the one that I would have the easiest time using four times a day, uh, for 21 or 28 days, I don't entirely remember.

So the protocol was to swish and gargle with mouthwash four times a day for either 21 or 28 days and keep track of your symptoms. I started with Listerine Zero late one afternoon. Within 24 hours, my fever had broken and I felt remarkably better. And so I kept swishing and gargling.

One of the things that the doctor told me was that now she uses mouthwash as a prophylactic. So at the end of a day of traveling or being in large groups of people or someplace where she felt like, you know, it would be really easy to pick up a respiratory virus, after she brushed her teeth in the evening, she would swish and gargle with mouthwash then,

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not just now for dental health, but, or gum health, but to stave off respiratory viruses.

That makes really good sense to me as something to add to my routine, and I haven't added it to my routine really successfully. There's the big bottle of mouthwash still staring at me in my bathroom. And sometimes I remember to use it if I've been in crowded places or I feel a little wonky. I'll remember to do it.

But I want to offer it to you, if you're a regular mouthwash, user, I want to say keep it up. It's going to be good for you in the long run.

She did say for the short term, gargling, you know, swishing and gargling four times a day while you're sick is totally fine. But in normal life, when you're not trying to recover from a respiratory virus, that's way too much and it's not going to be good, uh, for your mouth. But once a day, she was saying that's a fine amount to be using mouthwash. So, I pass that on to you as well.

I really hope this has been helpful for you and that it hasn't been too gross.

One of the worst things about phlegm, I think, is that you can feel derailed by it. You can feel like you're perfectly healthy and then you go to try to sing something or get up to say something and all of a sudden there's this big hunk of phlegm in your way and it's like, "Why me, Lord? What did I do? What's, what's wrong?!"

And it can be really hard not to take it personally. And I just want to say for both of us that phlegm is just a fact of life. It's part of our body. It's part of the body. It's what we need for the voice to work at all. It's just

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something we're going to have to be in relationship with for the rest of our lives.

If you'd like to share with me anything that you do that works for you, I'd love to hear about that. So please feel free to send me an email at letters at mvmusik.com. Yeah.

Thanks so much for listening.

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