

7 ways that singing boosts your health

By Peta Bee

We all know that singing makes us feel good. But research shows that it has many other benefits for mind and body. Here's what the scientists have found:

Singing boosts memory and brain power

Joining a choir could lead to better brain health in older age, according to a study from the University of Exeter, published in the *International Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry* this year. Anne Corbett, professor in dementia research at Exeter, found that music and regular singing was linked to better brain health through improving memory and the ability to solve complex tasks. And continuing to sing later in life brings even greater benefits. "Overall, we think that being musical could be a way of harnessing the brain's agility and resilience, known as cognitive reserve," Corbett says.

It increases levels of stress-busting hormones

Belting out a good song can have a remarkable effect on stress levels, according to research conducted by the Royal College of Music and published in the journal *Frontiers in Psychology*. Provided that you are singing in a relaxed environment, it was shown to reduce levels of the hormone cortisol, which is released in response to stress. Another study by neuroscientists at Western Michigan University showed that singing boosts levels of the stress-busting hormone oxytocin. "Music and singing are an enormous stimulation for our brain," says Dr Julia Christensen, a neuroscientist and research fellow in the department of psychology at City, University of London. "Countless studies have shown that it impacts our hormonal balance and decreases stress more effectively than any medication."

Regular singing can stop you snoring

Singing helps to strengthen the throat muscles, which, in turn, can reduce snoring even in people diagnosed with obstructive sleep apnoea (OSA). Weak muscles in the soft palate of the mouth and the upper throat are a common underlying cause of chronic snoring and OSA, but Professor Malcolm Hilton, a consultant otolaryngologist at the Royal Devon and Exeter NHS Trust and the University of Exeter Medical School, showed that 20 minutes of simple singing exercises performed daily for three months helped to strengthen these muscles, reducing the frequency and severity of snoring, and improving quality of sleep compared with those who didn't sing.

Singing fights anxiety and depression

Social singing, as part of a choir or a community singing group, helps to alleviate low mood, partly by promoting a feeling of belonging, security and wellbeing, according to researchers at the Norwich Medical School at the University of East Anglia reporting in the *BMJ*. Findings revealed that, for some, the social singing experience was "a life-saver", with the UEA team concluding that most people considered it to be "a key component" — and for some the only component — in their recovery and psychological stability.

When it comes to breathing, singing has similar benefits to yoga

If you sing in a choir your heartbeat will be synchronised with other members, rising and falling in time with the tempo of the music. And, as your exhale occurs during song phrases and inhale between them, singing is also a form of controlled breathing that researchers reporting in the journal *Frontiers in Psychology* suggested has the same benefits as breathing exercises in yoga. These effects were shown to "impose" a calm and regular breathing pattern that has a positive effect on heart rate and on general health.

Singing can boost immunity

If you want to boost your immune system and help to ward off illness, try singing along to your favourite tunes rather than just listening to them. A team of German researchers asked participants to sing or listen to music on two separate occasions. Listening to music did lower stress hormones such as cortisol, but when they sang the benefits were even greater, with raised levels of immunoglobulin A, an antibody that fights off infection. And in a study of cancer patients in 2016, researchers from the Royal College of Music also found that singing in a choir for just one hour a week led to increases in levels of cytokines, immune system proteins that help the body to fight serious illness.

Want to learn a foreign language? Sing it!

If you want to learn French, Spanish or even Hungarian, try singing words or short phrases in the foreign language. Researchers from the University of Edinburgh found that people who adopted this approach while learning Hungarian, chosen because it is particularly difficult to learn, were twice as good at speaking the new language later on than those who repeated the same phrases by speaking them.

Singing words to music creates stronger links in the brain, with the melody providing an extra cue to jog the memory.

“Singing every day can strengthen muscles in the throat, reducing snoring”

