

Your Health

Time to flex vocal muscles

Group singalongs good for health

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You may want to join your local choir. According to research group singalongs improve overall health.

THOUGH Brahms and Beethoven aren't what Richard Simmons had in mind with *Sweatin' to the Oldies*, new research suggests the composers' choral work might be just what your body wants. According to Victoria Meredith, a University of Western Ontario professor who used the school's adult choirs as a "live research lab," participation in choral music leads to increased respiratory function, improved overall health, a heightened immune system and improved brain function.

Meredith also concludes that performing in a choir "can keep you younger and healthier for longer," pointing to similar studies that found people who sing on a regular basis require fewer doctors' visits, are less prone to falls, don't need as much medication, and are less likely to be depressed.

Put simply, group singalongs may offer the benefits of exercise without the humiliation of Spandex.

"Just as in general physical exercise, optimal results are seen when a singer exercises their vocal muscles at least three times a week for at least 20 minutes at a time," says Meredith, who has worked with the Canadian Centre for Aging and Activity.

"A heavy workout one day is usually best followed by either a light workout or vocal rest the following day."

Meredith's research with four choirs, whose members varied in age from 18 to 84, spanned the last two years. Her investigation looked at everything from breath control and vocal range to anecdotal information such as whether or not the choristers felt happier or more aware of their bodies when they performed.

"Individual participant responses included such comments as: 'Singing keeps my mind more agile,' 'Singing increases the amount of joy in my life' (and) 'My breathing is better -- even after lung surgery,'" says Meredith, noting the observations align closely with those of George Washington University's three-year study on the impact of professionally conducted cultural programs on older adults.

Though Meredith remarks that many of the documented benefits of singing are "of a psychological nature, related to being part of a group with shared goals," researchers have also discovered compelling evidence for physical advantages. The disease-fighting protein (slg A), for example, was found to increase by 150 per cent during choir rehearsals and 240 per cent during performances.

John McMillan, an Edmonton musician and choir director, may be living proof of the power of song. Since he began performing choral music 13 years ago, McMillan says he gets sick less often, has more energy, and feels generally happier.

"When (a show) goes well and you feel like you've positively affected other people, it affects you, too," says McMillan, 28. "I feel rejuvenated after a performance -- kind of like my soul has been revitalized."