

Staying Healthy as a Musician - 5 Ways to Play Your Instrument Without Injury

By Christina Thompson

Most people know that athletes can easily injure themselves, but did you know that musicians are at risk for injury as well? Playing a musical instrument is a physical activity just like playing sports, and without the right approach, musicians can risk hurting themselves.



Stress and overuse injuries caused by intense practice can hinder or even end promising musical careers, so it is important to learn how to practice in a healthy way. By using these five tips, you can be well on your way to a lifetime of injury-free music making!

One of the easiest ways to become a healthier musician is to exercise. Exercising strengthens and stretches the body, and gives you greater ability to tackle the demands of playing your instrument. Yoga and Pilates are both excellent types of exercise to gain flexibility and breath control, but any kind of exercise will bring you benefits when you play your instrument. You can even use your exercise routine to work on specific areas of your body that you use while playing.

Since playing an instrument is a physical activity, make sure to drink plenty of water when you play. Your body needs water to help transport nutrients to your cells, dispose of waste products, and lubricate your joints and tissues. If you are a wind or brass player, drinking water can keep your throat, mouth, and lips from becoming dry as you blow air through your instrument. For brass players, who make extensive use of the small muscles in the face, drinking water can help these tiny muscles work at their optimum level throughout a practice session.

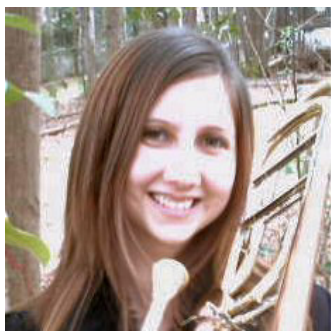
Don't push yourself. Maybe you can play that difficult passage more quickly by straining your hands, but is nailing that passage worth hurting yourself? If you train yourself to play strenuously, you may end up with overuse and stress injuries that can keep you from playing at all. If you feel pain or discomfort while you're playing, take it seriously! Pinpoint the discomfort, determine what's causing it, and then take the time to fix it. Training yourself to use your body in a relaxed, healthy way can be tedious and require great attention to detail, but the result will be your ability to play well without hurting yourself. It's better to take the time to train your fingers to play that tough passage in a relaxed way, than to permanently damage them by playing strenuously.

Likewise, long, intense practice isn't necessarily good practice. Since you are engaging in physical activity, it's important to take breaks when you practice. Organizing your practice so you have alternating blocks of activity and rest can help you achieve excellent results without

strain. Also, remember that practice is mental as well as physical, and engage your mind to make learning music more efficient. Instead of trying to physically force a trouble spot to correct itself, use strategies like isolating difficult notes and playing slowly to help you better understand the passage. Ten minutes of focused, purposeful practice can be more effective than hours of unfocused practice, and much easier on your body.

Every part of your body has its own natural position and movement pattern; for example, the wrists are naturally flexible, and the fingers naturally curve. Keeping your movements as natural as possible while playing can reduce the possibility of injury. Compare the position of different parts of your body when you're standing or sitting normally with when you're playing. Do your shoulders rise up when you're holding your instrument? Do you have extra tension in your jaw when you play? Take short breaks during practice to observe how you're using your body, and if any parts are moving awkwardly, pay attention to them and make adjustments to help them move more naturally. Being aware of how you use your body and adjusting your movements can help you avoid injury and feel more comfortable when you play.

By exercising, drinking water, practicing smarter, and understanding your body's natural movements, you can give yourself years of musical enjoyment and stave off painful overuse injuries. If you want to play healthier but aren't sure how to begin, finding an experienced teacher and setting up a private lesson is a great way to get feedback on how you're using your body, and start down the road to healthy playing!



Christina Thompson is a professional trombonist and music educator living in Raleigh, North Carolina. Christina is dedicated to helping trombonists of all ages discover, develop, and enjoy their signature musical sound in a positive, healthy environment. For more information, please visit <http://www.summerglen-music.com>.