



The Voice and Aging

As we age, our voices change. The most dramatic voice changes are those during childhood and adolescence. The larynx (or voice box) and vocal cord tissues do not fully mature until late teenage years. Hormone-related changes during adolescence are particularly noticeable among boys. The rapid changes in the size and character of the larynx causes characteristic pitch breaks and voice “cracking” during puberty as we learn to use our rapidly changing voice instruments.

After several decades of relatively stable voice, noticeable change can occur in the later years of life. As our bodies age, we lose muscle mass, our mucous membranes thin and become more dry, and we lose some of the fine coordination that we had in younger years. It is no surprise that these changes occur in the larynx as well, and this leads to changes in our voice. Your doctor may call these changes vocal cord atrophy or bowing, presbyphonia, or presbylaryngis.

Changes in the Voice as We Age

Below is a list of commonly reported voice changes as we age:

- Higher pitch voice in men
- Lower pitch voice in women
- Reduced volume and projection of the voice (or “thin” voice)
- Reduced vocal endurance
- Difficulty being heard in noisy situations
- Tremor or shakiness in the voice

These symptoms are amplified by the reduced hearing ability that commonly occurs in our peers as we age.

NOTE: Much of the time, hoarseness and vocal difficulties are not simply age related change. Any change that you notice in your voice should be a warning sign that something may be wrong. See your otolaryngologist (ear, nose, throat doctor). Almost all voice problems are highly treatable.



What Can Be Done About Age-Related Voice Change?

If you are bothered by your voice, take action today. As a first step, consider taking the Voice-Related Quality of Life quiz available on the Academy's World Voice Day Web site. (A print version is also available; see Voice-Related Quality of Life Fact Sheet). By answering a short series of questions, you'll be able to measure the quality of your voice.

Secondly, consider a vocal fitness program (i.e. voice therapy), as healthy voice use is key to voice preservation. Under the guidance of a speech-language pathologist, a vocal fitness program can make a big difference.

Finally, some people are candidates for medical or surgical treatment to improve the steadiness, strength, or endurance of the voice. See your Otolaryngologist for further information.

Overall Body Fitness Can Fuel Your Voice

Most of us want to maintain our youthful fitness and the same holds true for the voice. Maintaining excellent overall body fitness will help keep your voice healthy. Keep vocally fit as well—in many cases the more active you stay vocally, the stronger your voice will be. Healthy vocal exercises may not seem as obvious as healthy exercises in the gym, so professional guidance from a voice therapist or voice coach is very helpful. Some things you may do on your own though include: reading a book or paper aloud for 10-15 minutes, 2 or 3 times a day, as well as singing with the radio.

World Voice Day is a public education campaign presented by the American Academy of Otolaryngology—Head and Neck Surgery. To find an otolaryngologist, log onto www.entnet.org and click on "Find an ENT."

