



Care of the Aging Voice



Agenda Topics



- **Background – Education about Aging**
- **Basics That Matter**
- **The Wobble**
- **Encouragement**
- **Various sources**
- **Some Rehearsal Suggestions**
- **Questions?**
- **References**



As Time Goes By



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
- Hearing loss

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



Physiological Changes



Over time, however, the cartilages of the larynx begin to calcify and become slightly more rigid. The joints that allow for three-dimensional movement of the vocal folds become stiffer and the bulk of muscle of the vocal folds diminishes. These findings are not dissimilar to those that can be seen in other muscles and joints in the body. Often, the vocal folds become slightly bowed, which prevents tight vocal fold closure, and result in a somewhat more breathy voice with a reduction in the very upper portion of the range. This in turn requires tighter closure and tension.

As people age, there is a decrease in mucous and saliva secretions not only in the mouth but in the larynx as well. Smooth vibration is reduced. It is important to maintain good hydration and this can be supplemented with products that thin the mucous such as Humabid® or Mucinex®.



Potential Menopause Effects



Menopause and the Nervous System

The menopausal phase normally lasts from the age of 47 to the age of 55.

The neurological motor and sensation functions of the larynx are largely controlled by the vagus nerve. Its responsiveness is improved by estroprogesterone. Therefore, at menopause the radical drop in the secretion of estrogens and the complete halt in the secretion of progesterone induce slower nervous conduction from the brain to the larynx. As a result, **vocal response slows down slightly**, which can hamper rapid changes in frequencies when singing. **Later, the vibrato (seven vibrations per second) can become difficult to maintain**. The voice can gradually gear down to the tremolo (four vibrations per second).

During the **perimenopause**, ovarian activity strongly diminishes. Progesterone and estrogen levels are dramatically reduced. Similarly, the secretion of male hormones also drops off considerably. But their presence, now that they are no longer counterbalanced by feminine hormones, **can sometimes cause the voice to become more masculine**.

Voice - Dysphonia and the Aging Voice

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Basics That Matter



Playing the instrument (Physical stuff - What is the vocal Instrument?)

- Posture / Breathing well:
 - Hold the instrument with great command and majesty
 - Don't reach for notes with your chin
 - Awesome Breath = Awesome Tones!
 - Hydrate (Days in advance of rehearsal or performance)
- Sing freely - (Mental Stuff)
 - "Sing with effortless power not powerful effort".
 - Tongue tension – Monitor / Don't change
 - Reinforcing your image of good vocal production while singing (Vocal heroes?)
- Warm up and Warm Down
 - Smooths out the breaks and set the voice



The Wobble



From David Jones

What is it - "overly wide vibrato" which affects a large variation of pitch

Potential Causes:

1. Lack of focus in vocal tone
2. Singing without proper closure of the vocal cords
3. Inconsistent "resistance" in the body to control the outward flow of air (some call this "support")
4. Singing with too much "thick vocal cord mass"
5. Dragging too much "chest voice" or "heavy mechanism" (see William Vennard's book) too high
6. A shaking diaphragm.



The Wobble – Cont.



From David Jones

Potential Fixes: (Some are two-fers ☺)

- Practicing vocal exercises going from "ng" to a vowel can help a singer tremendously.
- The "ng" brings the vocal cords together in the perfect approximation without too much "squeeze of the cords or too much wild loose air through the cords".
- If one takes a breath as though they have forgotten what to say, the feeling will come into the body.
- Staccato exercises on a closed vowel like "i" or "e" can be most helpful in solving this problem. Again, the attack must be with the cords gently together on the "thin edges".
- I suggest to singers that they use the tiny "u" vowel because it allows the voice to "lighten without squeezing".
- Again use the idea of a "constant and even resistance" in which the body gently "flexes outward" at an even rate (ZZZZZ exercise with rib cage expansion).



Encouragement



Many of the voice characteristics of advanced age may be consequences of underlying structural and physiological changes, often related to various disease processes. However, there is increasing evidence that vocal changes may be very minor and may even be absent in men and women who are physiologically fit.

If one were to divide an aging population (people >70 years) into two groups, the fit and the less-fit, the vocal changes described above for normal aging would largely be absent in the fit group and present among the less-fit aged group. We might postulate that very fit older performers, who can add training and experience to their vocal performance, may not experience deleterious vocal changes as they get older.



Various Sources



There are lots of sources of information out there.....

.....let's look at some summaries to see if we can find universal recommendations



Preserving A Youthful Voice



Preserving a Youthful Voice: A Multifactorial Treatment

The key to preserving a youthful voice:

- Serious about physical exercise
- Hydration / lubrication of the vocal cords
- Netti pots or other nasal irrigation can keep the sinuses clean and open
- Dental hygiene
- Muscular activity
- Nutrition
- Vitamin and mineral supplements
- Possibly appropriate hormone therapy
- Potentially Anti reflux medication

The multiple potential etiologies of a voice problem in the aging patient may make specific identification and treatment difficult, because the disorder may be related to a number of different factors.

In general, people who are conscientious about their overall health will maintain good care of the health of their vocal cords. For the average person this should help to maintain a strong and vibrant voice. For the performer, they can most certainly retain an efficient vocal tessitura and timbre.

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Stay Fit



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.



Steps To Keep A Healthy Voice



The following steps are helpful for anyone who wants to keep their voice healthy.

Key Steps for Keeping Your Voice Healthy

- Hydration helps to keep thin secretions flowing to lubricate your vocal folds. Drink plenty (up to eight 8-ounce glasses is a good minimum target) of non-caffeinated, non-alcoholic liquids throughout the day.
- Try not to scream or yell. These are abusive practices and put great strain on your vocal cords.
- Warm up - Most people know that singers warm up their voices before a performance, yet many don't realize the need to warm up the speaking voice before heavy use. Warm-ups can be simple, such as gently gliding from low to high tones on different vowel sounds, doing lip trills (like the motorboat sound that kids make), or tongue trills.
- Don't smoke. Smoking causes inflammation and polyps of the vocal cords.
- Use good breath support. Breath flow is the power for voice. Take time to fill your lungs before starting to talk, and don't wait until you are almost out of air before taking another breath to power your voice.
- Listen to your voice. When your voice is complaining to you, listen to it.



Some Rehearsal Suggestions

Working with Aging Voices - Kathleen DeJardin



1. **Breath Relaxation** – Releases tension in the body that can interfere with healthy vocal production.
2. **Jaw Release** – Reduces tension in the mouth and jaw area during speaking and singing.
3. **Lip Trills** – Release lip tension and actively connect breathing, singing, speaking
4. **Tongue Trills** – Release the tongue and engage the breathing and the voice.
5. **Octave Drills** – Provide maximum stretch on the vocal folds (Up to 3 octaves)
6. **Sirens / Vocal Sighs** – Improve the resonant focus of the sound and continue vocal work with maximum stretch of the vocal folds.
7. **Humming** – Highlights the anterior (Frontal) vibrations in the lips and facial bones.
8. **Gliding on Triplets** – Keeps voice free and flexible. Remember to release the jaw.
9. **Stepwise, repeating note pattern** – Good for onset work. Breathe in rounded lips and released jaw.
10. **Skips and scale pattern** – Breathe in on and 'ah' vowel shape.
11. **Arpeggios** – Work the entire range to keep folds agile and help to maintain and extend the range.
12. **Working with Wide Vibratos** – Sustaining a steady column of air



Universal DO's



1. Take care of yourself: Get good sleep, eat well, exercise,
2. Hold the instrument with great command and majesty
3. Breathe well (Awesome breaths can lead to awesome tones!)
4. Sing / Hum daily: The more you use the voice the more consistent / better it gets
5. Remember the mental side: Compliment / congratulate yourself where appropriate – What did you do well? (We can be hard on ourselves. Your mental game may be a big key)



Questions



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