Menopause and Voice Change

by AFRA WILLMORE

Why Is My Voice Getting Deeper?

I was slightly startled this week when my teenaged son's friend got into my car and said greeted me. His voice, which only a few weeks before had been high and squeaky, had dropped several octaves and the skinny boy in my passenger seat now sounded like Barry White.

Of course this is a common event - some boys' voices jump up and down the scale until their hormones leave them with hairy armpits and a rich baritone while others voices seem to gradually get lower and lower as their puberty hormones kick in.

But what I hadn't realized is that thanks to the hormonal changes during perimenopause, some women also can experience quite significant voice changes.

Have you noticed your voice seems deeper? Or are you experiencing harshness of tone and throat dryness, or find yourself clearing your throat more frequently? It might be down to, guess what? Yes – your hormones!

I had no idea that these changes were linked to the menopause, along with the fact that as you age your larynx naturally lowers. You can slather on anti-ageing creams and dye your hair all you like, but when the stranger on the phone adopts a patronizing tone and calls you "dear," you know that those pesky hormones have changed your voice and given your age away.

How Hormones Affect Your Voice

So how exactly do the hormones affect your voice? Well your vocal chords need lubrication to work efficiently and since tissue dryness is a common problem in menopause it can leave you chords dry. It then takes a lot more respiration to vibrate them leading to exhaustion and hoarseness. (This is the same dryness can also affect your undercarriage, leading to dryness during sex.)

Loss of collagen, diminishing lung capacity and muscle tone also affects the voice. These changes are most noticeable in smokers – yet another reason to give up as soon as possible!

The problem is probably most noticeable in singers (obviously) who may not be able to hit the high notes any more and lose pureness of tone across their usual range. The good news is that the voice can be re-trained with special exercises, so if you are serious about your singing it's worth seeking out a teacher experienced in working with women affected by menopausal voice changes.

Teachers, sales staff, call centre telephonists and other people who use their voice a lot during the day might also be keen for a solution to the problem. Doctors report that patients who rely on their voice for a living complain that they get hoarse and tired more quickly as they get older.

Next page: how to protect your vocal chords.

What Can I Do?

The good news is there are several things you can do to help protect your vocal chords from the effects of diminishing estrogen.

Apparently acidic foods can exacerbate the problem so it might be worth avoiding spicy foods, white wine, citrus and tomatoes. There goes my Friday night takeaway and glass of wine!

Dark chocolate and older red wines are OK – unless like me you suffer from migraine triggered by these things! And surprise, surprise, drinking more water will almost certainly help. Most of us don't drink enough water and it helps to maintain the level of all body fluids helping digestion, circulation, transportation of nutrients and even to maintain body temperature. It also keeps your skin looking at its best and helps maintain normal bowel function.

Water also helps prevent muscle fatigue – and more efficiently working muscles will help the voice fatigue issue. The old adage of eight glasses a day is a bit of a myth apparently – any fluid (apart from alcohol) will help and of course most foods have some fluid content as well.

HRT (hormone replacement therapy) may also help. Speak to your doctor if you feel this is the path you want to go down, as there is huge choice of medications available delivered in a number of ways.

Pay your dentist a visit too. Decreased estrogen can affect your teeth and the bones under your gums making tooth movement and loss much more likely during menopause. If you lose teeth your cheeks start to cave in, which can also affect the way you speak.

I know it all sounds a bit grim but don't panic especially if, like me, you haven't noticed any changes to your voice. Apparently most women don't even mention menopausal voice syndrome (to give it its proper name) to their doctors – either they haven't really noticed any changes or maybe compared to hot flushes, heart palpitations and vaginal dryness, which are the most commonly reported symptoms, voice changes seem minor.

If all else fails and you notice a new depth to your tone you can always console yourself with the idea that some people find a husky deep voice very sexy – it certainly didn't do Marlene Dietrich, Eartha Kitt or Shirley Bassey any harm!