

Ep #31: The Voice and Aging

Can't
wait
to hear
you

with
Michèle Voillequé

Full Episode Transcript

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Your voice is unique to you. It grows as you grow. It changes as you change. If you're curious about the relationship between your voice and your body, your heart and your mind, welcome. My name is Michèle Voillequé and I can't wait to hear you.

I want to talk today about your voice and aging and I notice right off the bat that my voice, to me anyway, sounds deeper than normal. I haven't been awake for very long and so this is partly my morning voice. It's also partly I had a lot of salt yesterday and I can feel that I'm retaining water and I think that my vocal folds are puffier than normal.

What does that mean?

So our vocal folds are two sets of muscles on either side of the throat that are covered with three layers of mucosa. The vocal folds vibrate, air comes up from the lungs, the vocal folds vibrate, and that's what creates sound. And the mucosa on top are what lubricate that vibration so that the whole thing feels smooth.

One of the words we use to describe the voice when it's not working so well sometimes is “sticky.” “My voice feels sticky.” Well, this morning, my voice feels puffy.

I'm retaining water and I feel those, that layer of mucosa is puffy, puffier than usual. And it's making it easier for me to speak at a lower pitch. And as I keep drinking water and move around today, that will go away and I'll be back to a more normal, slightly higher pitched speaking voice that I'm used to.

So this isn't, this isn't a permanent problem, but it is a thing. And I'm recording this today in this slightly stranger voice to illustrate for you how there can be a difference in how you sound just from one day to another. And that isn't pathological. That is just, I had a lot of salt yesterday.

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You might also notice that your morning voice is different from your afternoon voice. That's because you were lying down and everything in your body relaxed when you were asleep.

So it's less about your voice being puffy as just your, everything being relaxed. And as the vocal folds tone up during the day, they acquire some tension, some healthy tension, and you sound like your typical self.

So when we're talking about the voice and aging, we're not talking about so much a sudden change that where you wake up one morning and everything's different.

For the most part, we're talking about gradual changes over time. And if you're on the younger end, you can do yourself a favor by starting to notice now how your voice changes from day to day, and start to get comfortable with that idea – that your voice does change from day to day.

That kind attention that you can pay to yourself, and together with some, maybe some scientific experiments on yourself will help you navigate your voice as it ages.

Of course, there are catastrophic things that can happen. That's not what I'm going to talk about today. I'm going to talk about the general, gradual changes that we can expect.

In preparation for this episode, I sought out a resource called [The Mature Singers Guidebook](#), and I'll put a link in the show notes. It's quite good. you don't need to feel like you're mature or even a singer, I think to benefit from it.

But what's meant by a mature singer, is somebody who's at least in their forties, although the author of the book, I believe is in their sixties. So

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any anywhere from mid thirties on up to nineties, I think it's a useful book to read.

You also don't need to be a singer to benefit from it. The book is full of excellent exercises that though, if you're not a singer they might not make a lot of sense.

For anybody, singer or not, I would suggest if you're wanting to work on age related changes in your voice, that you do that with another person, that you find a teacher who can help you with that.

Because while the exercises are really good, there just is no substitute for having another human – informed, educated human – accompany you through these changes.

To have someone who can not only show you exercises and help you learn how to do them, but also provide you feedback about how you sound and how you're doing, because it's very easy to get wrapped up in our heads about how everything's “terrible” and “this just doesn't work” and “I don't sound the way I want to sound.”

And, as soon as you start thinking you don't sound the way you want to sound, you stop using your instrument well and remove the possibility of sounding better because the body – how we sound – is also a function of how we're using the breath, the posture we're holding.

And if you can imagine, the posture that comes with, “I don't sound the way I want to sound” is rolling in your shoulders, shrinking, making yourself smaller, right? It's hard to make a good sound when that's your dominant thought.

So it's really good to have somebody else who has a bit of authority and can help you hear yourself differently and understand what constitutes progress. Because it's not, this isn't a black and white endeavor.

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Just as I said earlier, it's not like you wake up one day and everything's broken. We're talking about shades of gray. We're talking about managing shades of gray and it's good to have a companion when you're in that kind of a project.

Okay, so what's true about the voice and aging? We started with the vocal folds, my puffy vocal folds. Let's just stay there for a minute. They are affected also by hormones.

Testosterone makes them thicker and estrogen helps with flexibility. So to the extent that the balance of those two hormones changes in our body throughout our life, our voice is going to change too.

This is really noticeable in teenage boys when their voice deepens and it's really noticeable in menopausal women when our voice deepens.

And if you're singing while pregnant, it's a rollercoaster how your voice behaves on any given day, because of the hormones and also because of the growing baby limiting the space available for breathing.

There are hormone therapies that change the voice or can modify the effects of natural age-related changes in the hormone levels in the body.

I am not an endocrinologist. I don't play one on TV, but that's who you'd want to talk to – a speech pathologist, an ear, nose and throat doctor, an endocrinologist – if you think that hormone replacement therapy is something that you want to try because you're concerned about changes in your voice. That is a thing.

Your vocal folds are also affected by acid reflux, which is a common problem in middle age and later life. You can address acid reflux with medication, with diet, exercise. Acid reflux does affect the quality of your voice. It is something, if you are concerned about the quality of your voice, that you're going to want to get under control. And again, I'm not a doctor, but that is also something to look at.

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And your vocal folds are affected by how you use your voice. And one thing I notice in a lot of my older students is a propensity to clear their throat a lot.

There seems to be more phlegm the older we get. And that chronic throat clearing is not really great for your vocal, is not really great for your voice. And the reason you're clearing your throat is something to look at.

So for lots of people, it's not all the time. It's just seasonal allergies. They have a lot of phlegm. They feel like they've got gunk stuck in their throat, and so they clear their throat.

Other people feel like they have something stuck in their throat all the time. And that's when it's good to look at how well hydrated you are and what medications are you taking that might be dehydrating you.

And that's a conversation again to have with your doctor, your pharmacist, to figure out how you can loosen this chronic phlegm that you may be having so that you can clear your throat less and, your voice will sound better, smoother, less sticky. It's time well spent.

There's one more thing, as you age, with the vocal folds. We lose muscle mass as we age. There have been lots of articles lately about that and how strength training is something that older people should do to maintain their muscle mass.

It's also true of the vocal folds. They do lose mass, and so like the rest of your body, your voice is kind of a “use it or lose it” proposition. You do need to exercise those muscles in order for them to maintain their tone.

And the book, [The Mature Singers Guidebook](#) has some really good exercises in it that may or may not make a lot of sense depending on

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how much singing you've done in your life and how much you've thought about the singing that you've done in your life.

So just know that's another thing to remember, that your voice is a muscle and your voice is a muscle that you need to use.

Already, I've given you a long list of kinds of people you can talk to about your voice, and I guess the takeaway I want you to have is that this is not something we do alone. We need feedback from other people. We need information from other people.

So if your voice is bothering you, you need to share that concern with informed others to find a solution. Because there is a solution. That's my assertion. I don't think you get to sit on the couch and not speak or sing anymore. I don't think that's useful for anybody.

Broadening out from the vocal folds, they're in your body and the rest of your body is really important for how they work. So, your lung capacity, your cardiovascular health, your posture, how much jaw tension you have, how often do you stretch the inside of your mouth, all of these things affect your vocal quality.

And the good news is you have control over all of them. Well, most of them. There are diseases that affect your cardiovascular health and your lung capacity. Of course that's true. But I mean that you're, there's a lot that's under your control.

So what I would say is you need to go for a walk every day. You need to lift your groceries. You need to use your body in good and healthy ways if you want your voice to remain strong.

Your jaw and neck tension definitely affect your vocal quality. And let me get back to the stretching the inside of your mouth. What I mean by that is the stretch that happens when you yawn.

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So I'm gonna yawn. And maybe that'll make you yawn so you can notice that when you yawn, there's a stretch up at the back of your mouth. And if you yawn really big, you can notice that it might be hard to hear.

So there's not only a stretch up, there's a stretch kind of out and up. And if you yawn really big, you might notice that there's a stretch down, and that also your throat widens.

And all of that stretching that you're doing there, those are muscles. Those are muscles that can be toned or not. and when they're toned, you have access to better resonance when you're singing.

They've actually done studies, a couple of small scale studies on whether toning those muscles helps with snoring and sleep apnea, and they found that it does. I'll put links in the show notes. They are small scale studies, and I haven't seen that there's been a program of singing for sleep apnea that's come out.

But what they did was they, took some people who had, issues with snoring. Some of them were snore- I don't remember how the studies were divided, but the problems were snoring and sleep apnea.

They take these people, they give them some singing lessons, and they see if the snoring and sleep apnea improves. And in enough of the cases it did, enough to suggest that singing might be good for you.

So as we age, we can lose cardiovascular fitness. We can lose muscle mass. Our lung capacity can go down. The muscles we don't use, they don't stay as toned. And all of that affects how the voice sounds and how we feel about our voice.

So, whatever physical activity is fun and good for you, keep doing it as you get older. This is another reason to keep doing it as you get older, because it supports the voice.

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The last thing I want to say about the voice and aging is that we're talking about managing a process. We're talking about something that's much more like a grayscale than it is black and white.

It's pretty rare that you wake up one day and suddenly your voice doesn't work. Sometimes that happens, but for most people, for most of our lives, our voice is a little bit different every day.

And accepting that and being curious about that and continuing to learn about that will help as you keep living and your voice keeps changing every day.

And one of the things that's hard about getting older, sometimes, is being further and further from school, being further and further from an environment where you weren't expected to know everything, where you were learning new things every day.

And we can forget how to learn. It can be a challenge to remember that not knowing something or trying something new just to see what happens is okay, and safe and can actually be fun.

So engaging this project of your voice with a sense of curiosity and adventure and compassion and excitement will make it easier to manage.

I mention many, many people that you can consult about your voice: endocrinologists, speech pathologists, ear, nose and throat doctors, pharmacists, right? To talk about what might be going on with your voice.

And you're the expert on you. It's ultimately your body. You know how you feel. You know what you sound like. You know what changes you're happy with and what changes you want to try to do something about. And how well you know yourself is entirely only in your control.

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If you have a specific question about your voice, understanding that I'm not a doctor, I'd be happy to field it and see if I can help.

Many of my students are over 60 and I have a lot of experience working with the voice as it ages. I myself am 53 and have been experiencing some of these changes for quite a while.

And if there's a particular aspect of aging that you'd like to hear me address in a future episode, please let me know that, too. This is just the briefest of overviews. Thanks so much for listening.

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