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Menopause matters

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Menopausal

□ Dr Kathleen Cronie



voice change



When a close family member went through very early menopause (in her early 20s) Dr Kathleen Cronie, although not yet menopausal herself, became interested in menopause and has been working on this and bringing her vocal expertise to help women since then.

You may already be familiar with many of the common signs of menopause, and might even use a journal or app to track your symptoms as they change over time. But how many of us pay attention to menopausal fluctuations in our voices? Although research in this area is scarce, studies have found several common menopausal vocal changes. Our voice is an important part of our identity, how we present ourselves, and how we tell others what we feel and need. So why are we not talking more about our menopausal voices?

Our voices are affected by hormones throughout our lives. We notice most teenage boys' voices deepening during puberty, but it's less frequently noted that most girls' voices (in fact almost everyone's voices) change and deepen during puberty too. The menstrual cycle also affects our voices, a fact that singers have long since known, with European opera houses historically giving singers time off each month during their period – a practice that sadly is no longer in use these days!

Recently, I've been working with perimenopausal and post-menopausal singers, finding out about their experiences →

• Kathleen's choir meets every week.



and bringing them together to learn about menopausal voice change. Each week we discussed a vocal symptom and techniques for managing these. Through learning and singing together, the group gained confidence in using their voices – not only as singers but in other areas of their working and personal lives too. In our sessions we discussed six common menopausal vocal symptoms:

1. Dryness

We are hearing more discussion around vaginal dryness and its treatment, but we are yet to hear widespread discussion around vocal dryness. In 1999, scientists compared cervical smear cells with vocal fold smear cells taken from menopausal women with surprising results – the cells in our larynx and those in our cervix share many common features. It therefore makes sense that we'd see dryness as a vocal symptom as well as a vaginal one! Hormonal fluctuations can mean the mucosal covering of our vocal folds – small pieces of tissue that vibrate in our throats to make sound – grows thinner. This can leave us hoarse and uncomfortable when speaking/singing.

2. Swelling, heaviness, or lack of flexibility

Others find that their vocal folds retain fluid and swell. You might find that you feel like you need to clear your throat, or that your voice has a 'heavy' feeling. Singers often describe their voice feeling less flexible. Using your voice could feel less like driving a zippy speedboat these days and more like steering the Titanic. A singer experiencing this also told me that "It feels like I can't

swallow, like a lump in my throat". This can affect speaking as well as singing.

3. Unpredictability

During menopause, some singers have to deal with an unpredictable instrument, emitting squeaks as their voice alters. One singer described feeling like a teenage boy, not knowing what was going to come out of her mouth, and becoming used to the embarrassment of letting out an accidental, inelegant sound. Hormonal fluctuations can render our voices unpredictable, and learning to notice how our voice is feeling and functioning each day can be a tough addition to the list of symptoms to deal with.

4. Lack of power/fatigue

"I couldn't scream – if someone came at me in the street I just couldn't scream for help anymore." So described one singer the feeling of losing power in her voice post-menopause. Many singers I've worked with have agreed with her, and the feeling of losing power or volume in your voice is a common symptom. Singers often tell me they're no longer able to project their voices as loudly as they used to, and public speakers have told me that they can't command the room as forcefully as they have done in the past. In addition to losing power in the voice, some people find that their voice tires more quickly than it used to, or that they feel short of breath when trying to sustain their voice. Singers might find that they have to take additional breaths before the end of long passages, or that they have to take rests during longer rehearsals.



□ Voice Change



5. Lowering of the voice or 'colour' change

As estrogen levels dip, some find that the effects of testosterone on their voice are more conspicuous. One of the more noticeable effects can be difficulty accessing higher notes. Interestingly however, the singers I've worked with have described widely varying experiences in this area. Some say their voices are noticeably lower these days, others have felt no difference, whilst others found that their voice lowered for a period of time, but post-menopause they have access to their original range again. As one singer put it: "I thought back then I was becoming an alto, I just couldn't hit the higher notes. Now I'm back singing in the sopranos."

Some people also find that during menopause their voice 'colour' changes and sounds duller or loses some of the shine and brilliance it had before. We use the pitch and resonance of our voice to express how we are feeling in more than words, so any change to the way our voice sounds can be daunting.

6. Tension

With all these changes happening, it's understandable that we'd try and change the way we use our voice to compensate. Unfortunately, this often generates a lot of tension around our vocal apparatus. Excess tension is an absolute voice-killer! Our voices function best when the system producing them is feeling free and flexible. We also know that other menopausal symptoms can cause tension. Singers have told me that anxiety, slower



• Kathleen: "Your vocal journey is another piece of the menopausal puzzle, and one you can use as a compass in tracking changes as they happen."

thinking, and brain fog have left them nervous about coming to groups. As one singer put it: "Besides my voice, just coming along and picking up instructions was difficult. The anxiety this provoked made this really challenging." These feelings can leave us tense and uneasy, making relaxing and using our voice even more difficult.

So, what can you do to look after your voice as you navigate menopausal change?

It goes without saying that if you're experiencing long-term or debilitating symptoms you should see your GP. Day-to-day however, there are a few easy ways that you can look after your menopausal voice.

Take time

Firstly, take time each day to listen to your voice as you speak or sing, and notice how it feels to make sound. Has anything changed recently? Perhaps certain activities leave your voice more tired than others, or maybe as time goes on your voice is becoming lower in pitch or stronger in tone? Once you begin to notice these patterns, you'll be in a much stronger position to decide when you need vocal rest or when you might want to consult a vocal specialist.



Learning to breathe

Learning to breathe might seem like a strange suggestion, but good vocal function depends on well controlled breath management. Learning breathing techniques to use as you go about your day can make the world of difference.

There are some excellent videos created by NHS Speech and Language Therapists available online which demonstrate Accent Method breathing, a technique also taught by many members of the Association of Teachers of Singing. You might also wish to take a few lessons with a singing teacher – even if you're not a singer yourself! Some breathing and vocalising exercises can be hugely beneficial to the speaking voice and many teachers will be willing to focus solely on these with you.

Keep hydrated

Hydration is also vital in keeping our voices supple and in good condition. The NHS recommends 6–8 glasses of water per day. Many menopausal singers tell me that they find their voices feeling dry and tired. Making sure that you're well hydrated can help look after your voice. Bear in mind too that drinking water when you've a dry throat won't solve the problem immediately, as it takes time for your body to absorb the hydration. Try instead to ensure that drinking water steadily throughout the day is a part of your routine.



Rest

Finally, giving your voice some rest when it needs it is important. If your job involves a lot of speaking, try to add vocal breaks into your day where you can. Perhaps you could alternate meetings with silent administrative work? You could also add regular prompts into your diary to relax your abdominal and shoulder muscles, and make sure your posture is good as you speak to give your body the best chance of producing a reliable sound.

Menopause is a time of change. Our vocal apparatus is full of hormone receptors and as such is susceptible to many changes during this time. However, not all change is bad! Many singers tell me that working through vocal change has left them more attuned to their voice, and they now feel more in control of the sound that they make. Your vocal journey is another piece of the menopausal puzzle, and one you can use as a compass in tracking changes as they happen. Enjoy getting to know your voice and using it to express yourself! **MM**

Dr Kathleen Cronie is a conductor, singing teacher and project manager, living and working in Glasgow. Her PhD research explored expectations of choral conductors in the UK, with a focus on singers' needs. She is currently the conductor of Loud & Proud, Scotland's First LGBTQ+ Choir and is the author of Making Music's LGBTQ+-inclusion toolkit. Recently she has interviewed and worked with menopausal singers, and designed and led workshops and groups to support menopausal voices. She has been shortlisted in the Arts Champion of the Year category in the Glasgow Community Champion Awards for this work.

Kathleen is available for consultation and lessons both in-person and online and can be contacted via her website at www.kathleencronie.com or by email at kathleencronie@hotmail.com

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