

## Los Angeles Times – Health

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### A voice for the elderly

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Lots of things change as we get older — our hair turns gray, our skin wrinkles, and we become more forgetful.

Our voice may alter, too, from a once robust tone to a weaker timbre. While some voice changes are a normal part of aging, others could be a sign of something more serious.



A recent study found that among 248 people in their 80s, almost 20% had dysphonia, meaning hoarseness or other voice changes such as weakness or loss of voice. In addition, 14% had dysphagia, or painful swallowing. Despite that, more than 75% of the respondents hadn't looked for treatment, although more than half were interested in getting it.

"The interesting thing is that they're not doing much about it," says Dr. Seth Cohen, associate professor of otolaryngology and head and neck surgery at the [Duke Voice Care Center](#) in Durham, N.C. He's also lead author of the study that was presented at American [Academy of Otolaryngology-Head and Neck Surgery](#) this week in Chicago. "The most common reason they gave was that they weren't aware there was anything they could do about it. We now know there is a big barrier on the patient's side."

Voice changes, Cohen adds, can stem from weakened muscles or allergies, or more acute conditions such as neurological problems. Treatments are available, and not all are invasive. "Just because you're getting older doesn't mean you should ignore [symptoms]," he says. But voice or swallowing problems can also affect quality of life. In the

study, more severe swallowing problems were associated with worse voice-related quality-of-life issues. Those with both dysphonia and dysphagia scored higher on a depression scale than those with neither symptom.

The findings bring up a couple of issues: Cohen believes better screening programs are needed to assess voice and swallowing problems in the elderly that may get overlooked by their primary care physicians, and family and friends may need to serve as advocates for their elderly loved ones.

"Lots of things change as we age — physically, emotionally, economically — and people need to have a good quality of life," Cohen says. "We're trying to understand and meet those needs, but it's important for the public to grasp these concepts as well."

-- Jeannine Stein

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