Dear Alice,

I just want to ask what's wrong with my voice. I'm a 20-year-old male and sound like a girl when I speak. Is there something wrong with my health? How can I have a deep voice?

Answer

Dear Reader,

Without a face-to-face interaction, some people may hear a voice and try to picture the speaker in their mind; but voices don’t always “tell the truth”. The sound of your voice is shaped mostly by physiology — or how the body functions — so illnesses and abnormalities can affect the voice in various ways (more on this in a bit). Depending on what may be influencing how you sound when you speak, possible treatments may include voice or speech therapy, hormone therapy, and surgery. But, first it's time to explore a few different factors that can affect the sound of your voice.

For some, the causes for vocal changes (or lack thereof) can come with a diagnoses. Most people start to experience a change in their voice during puberty. In males, this happens when testosterone stimulates vocal folds located in the voice box, or larynx, to stretch; the longer the vocal folds, the lower the frequency or pitch. Occasionally, however, this change does not occur in some people. This could be due to a low amount of testosterone produced as a result of hypogonadism. The symptoms of hypogonadism may vary depending on when the condition appears — whether before and during, or after puberty. Lack of voice deepening, in particular, seems to be a symptom associated with the condition when it occurs before and during puberty. A medical professional can rule out any other causes (such as inflammation, infection, or lesions) and confirm a positive hypogonadism diagnosis through testing. Treatment for hypogonadism really depends on the cause and could include hormone replacement therapy, medication, or surgery.

Another condition that may affect your voice is a voice disorder called puberphonia. Also called “mutational falsetto”, people with the disorder continue to have adolescent voice characteristics (e.g., higher-pitched, voice cracking, and breathy) past the stage of puberty. It's a treatable, typically through the use of speech therapy. In the event that this is what is behind your higher-
than-usual vocal sounds, a speech therapist may be able to help work with you on the pitch, volume, rate, duration, and the timbre of your voice.

These are just a few of the conditions that may be behind your not-so-deep voice. Though it's difficult to say what, if anything, may be influencing the sound of your voice, it's also worth mentioning that there may actually be nothing "wrong with your voice" at all. Too often, folks are judged by how they sound. Factors such as your biological sex, gender (and gender norms), race, age, and the language you speak can all shape how your voice is used and how it is perceived by others. What's more, the desire to have a more masculine (deeper) voice may be shaped by social forces that in turn can influence your self-esteem and mental health. If you find that your high voice is negatively impacting your mental health, it may be helpful to talk about it further with a mental health provider.

Alice!
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