

THE 5 STAGES OF TRANSGENDER VOICE CHANGE FROM TESTOSTERONE

BY PETER FULLERTON, VOICE TEACHER / TRANS VOICE SPECIALIST

QUESTION: WILL TESTOSTERONE “RUIN” MY VOICE?

This is the most common question asked by singers considering testosterone therapy! Decades ago, vocal transition with testosterone *could* be harmful to the voice, but medical practices of prescribing “T” have evolved considerably since then. Nowadays, there is very little risk of “ruining” your voice from testosterone (as long as you follow medical advice)!

It’s true that there are many annoying symptoms that arise during voice change with T, but these are temporary and usually resolve within two years or less.

After voice change is complete, many individuals continue to have difficulty navigating their new voice. Fortunately, any remaining issues can be addressed through voice training.

THE 5 STAGES OF VOICE CHANGE*: WHAT TO EXPECT IN EACH STAGE

** Adapted from Working with Adolescent Voices by John M. Cooksey, 2005
Slideshow by Peter Fullerton, Voice Teacher / Trans Voice Specialist, 2024*

Voice change tends to follow a predictable, sequential process. The entire process may take anywhere from 2-5 years to complete, and the length of time each stage takes is unique for each individual person. A “low dose” of testosterone may slow the transition process, but will ultimately cause the same voice change as a “full dose.”

Some people choose to stop taking testosterone before completing all 5 stages. This may result in a voice that is nonbinary, gender ambiguous, agender, and/or genderfluid.

The next set of slides describe the 5 stages of voice change, listing the permanent changes to the voice and the temporary “transition symptoms” that can happen in each stage. Not everyone will experience all of these symptoms, and some individuals will be more affected than others.

STAGE 1: THE ONSET OF VOICE CHANGE

Permanent changes to the voice:

- None, or only extremely subtle changes (no significant drop in pitch)

Temporary transition symptoms in Stage 1:

- Voice may feel “off” (similar to having a cold)
- Singing range decreases / may lose access to some of the higher range
- High notes become tight and/or breathy
- Voice loses some richness of tone

*These “5 Stages of Voice Change” are adapted from Working with Adolescent Voices by John M. Cooksey, 2005
Slideshow by Peter Fullerton, Voice Teacher / Trans Voice Specialist, 2024*

VOICE TRAINING ADVICE FOR STAGE 1:

- Be prepared for singing to become more complicated and unpredictable
- Work on developing patience with the process of voice change and curiosity about specific changes from week to week
- Let high notes be unstable and resist the urge to “control” them through extra muscle engagement or tension

WHAT HAPPENS IF YOU PERMANENTLY STOP USING TESTOSTERONE DURING STAGE 1 OF VOICE CHANGE?

All of your temporary transition symptoms would go away. Your newly changed voice would closely resemble your pre-transition voice, but you may notice subtle differences in your experience of speaking or singing.

STAGE 2: VOICE BEGINS TO DROP

Note: A “vocal register” is a range of notes where the sound is produced by a specific mechanical action. For example, “chest voice,” “mix voice,” “head voice” and/or “falsetto” are some of the terms for different registers. “Passages” refer to the transitions between registers.

Permanent changes to the voice:

- New low notes begin to emerge
- Vocal registers and passages begin to drop lower in pitch

Temporary transition symptoms in Stage 2:

- Unstable high notes, which may break into head voice/falsetto (“cracking”)
- Difficulty with register transitions and register coordination (more “cracking”)
- Vocal tone may be thicker, darker, and less resonant (due to inflammation in the larynx and swelling in the vocal cords, similar to having mild laryngitis)
- It may become more challenging to “project” the voice

*These “5 Stages of Voice Change” are adapted from Working with Adolescent Voices by John M. Cooksey, 2005
Slideshow by Peter Fullerton, Voice Teacher / Trans Voice Specialist, 2024*

VOICE TRAINING ADVICE FOR STAGE 2:

- Stick to singing within the specific range that feels comfortable on any given day
- Don't use force or "push" your voice to produce a high note, to increase projection, or to add volume to new low notes
- Try to release yourself from any expectations of what you think your voice "should sound like" or how singing is "supposed to feel"

WHAT HAPPENS IF YOU PERMANENTLY STOP USING TESTOSTERONE DURING STAGE 2 OF VOICE CHANGE?

All of your temporary transition symptoms would go away, and you could proceed with training your newly changed voice. If your range, registers, and/or passages have dropped lower, these changes would now be permanent. Your voice would stabilize in its new range without "masculinizing" in tone color.

STAGE 3: CHAOS ENSUES

Permanent changes to the voice:

- Range continues to drop lower
- Vocal registers and passages also continue to drop lower in pitch

Temporary transition symptoms in Stage 3:

- The most severe vocal symptoms typically emerge during this stage due to increased inflammation of the larynx (fortunately, this is the shortest stage!)
- Difficulty with agility (voice feels clumsy), stamina (voice often feels tired), and producing a clear tone (voice may be husky, breathy, or hoarse)
- Range may be extremely limited
- Head voice/falsetto may disappear completely

*These “5 Stages of Voice Change” are adapted from Working with Adolescent Voices by John M. Cooksey, 2005
Slideshow by Peter Fullerton, Voice Teacher / Trans Voice Specialist, 2024*

VOICE TRAINING ADVICE FOR STAGE 3:

- Don't panic or catastrophize!
Vocal symptoms in this stage can be exceptionally distressing.
Remind yourself this is temporary
- Be prepared to rest your voice as much as possible. This is not the time to record your next album or perform a lead role in a musical!
- Stick to the range that feels most comfortable, even if it's a very small range

WHAT HAPPENS IF YOU PERMANENTLY STOP USING TESTOSTERONE DURING STAGE 3 OF VOICE CHANGE?

All of your temporary transition symptoms would go away, and you could proceed with training your newly changed voice. Any changes to your range, registers, and/or passages would now be permanent. Your voice would stabilize in its new range, and may sound gender ambiguous, agender, or genderfluid.

STAGE 4: STABILITY WITHIN A NEW NORMAL

Note: The “vocal tract” refers to the acoustic space inside your throat and head, which shapes the sound and tones of your voice.

Permanent changes to the voice:

- Range, vocal registers, and passages may still drop a little further
- Voice continues “masculinizing” as the vocal tract grows and changes shape

Temporary transition symptoms in Stage 4:

- Range is still limited, but begins to expand during this stage
- Agility is still compromised (voice feels clumsy)
- Head voice/falsetto may still be inaccessible, or may start to return
- Vocal tone becomes clearer, but may still sound light or thin
- The voice still feels less powerful (this will improve with time)
- Some singers develop a “hole” in their range, often around middle C

*These “5 Stages of Voice Change” are adapted from Working with Adolescent Voices by John M. Cooksey, 2005
Slideshow by Peter Fullerton, Voice Teacher / Trans Voice Specialist, 2024*

VOICE TRAINING ADVICE FOR STAGE 4:

- Spend time exploring and gently exercising your new low notes
- You can try register coordination exercises and agility exercises, but don't worry if you aren't seeing any improvements yet (you may just need to wait)
- Don't use this time to work on projection, tone, or expanding range – focus instead on relaxing your voice as much as you can

WHAT HAPPENS IF YOU PERMANENTLY STOP USING TESTOSTERONE DURING STAGE 4 OF VOICE CHANGE?

All of your temporary transition symptoms would go away, and you could proceed with training your newly changed voice. Any changes to your range, registers, and/or passages would now be permanent. Your voice would stabilize in its new range, with a partially “masculinized” tone color.

STAGE 5: EMERGING NEW VOICE

Permanent changes to the voice:

- Voice continues “masculinizing” as the vocal tract grows and changes shape

Temporary transition symptoms in Stage 5:

- High notes may still be tentative or unstable (but will continue improving)
- Singer may find greatest ease and comfort within their lower range (for now)
- Singer may need to lower their speaking voice range – speaking in a range that’s “too high” for their new voice can negatively impact singing technique
- Singer will need to adjust singing technique to their new voice – if not, tension can develop around the larynx, which may cause pain or discomfort

These “5 Stages of Voice Change” are adapted from Working with Adolescent Voices by John M. Cooksey, 2005

Slideshow by Peter Fullerton, Voice Teacher / Trans Voice Specialist, 2024

VOICE TRAINING ADVICE FOR STAGE 5:

- Continue to focus on relaxing your singing in the low and middle voice, and use that as a foundation for expanding range
- Frequent register coordination exercises and agility exercises will help regain these skills faster
- Experiment with lowering the pitch range of your speaking voice to find increased comfort and ease in your speaking voice

WHAT HAPPENS IF YOU PERMANENTLY STOP USING TESTOSTERONE DURING STAGE 5 OF VOICE CHANGE?

All of your temporary transition symptoms would go away, and you could proceed with training your newly changed voice. Your range, registers, and passages would have fully and permanently dropped into a “male” voice type, and the tone color of your voice would have partially or completely “masculinized”.

COMMON STRUGGLES AFTER VOICE CHANGE WITH TESTOSTERONE

These are all issues which can improve through voice training!

- “I’m confused about how to use my new voice”
- “I have no range / my range is very small”
- “There is a huge gap between my upper voice and my lower voice”
- “I still can’t figure out my head voice/falsetto”
- “My voice gets tired really easily”
- “People have trouble hearing me / I can’t ‘project’ my voice”
- “I can’t stop ‘pushing’ or straining when I sing”
- “It hurts when I sing” or “singing feels uncomfortable”
- “My speaking voice still sounds ‘too high’ and I keep getting misgendered”
- “I’m afraid to sing in front of people / my voice is unpredictable”

IF YOU ARE STILL EXPERIENCING
VOCAL SYMPTOMS AFTER 2+ YEARS
OF USING TESTOSTERONE, PLEASE
KNOW THAT YOU ARE NOT ALONE,
AND THAT THIS CAN GET BETTER
THROUGH VOICE TRAINING,
VOICE THERAPY, AND/OR
VOICE EDUCATION!

TIPS FOR VOICE TRAINING AFTER TRANSGENDER VOICE CHANGE

- Many singers who use testosterone are thrown off by muscle memory from singing with their pre-transition voice. This can lead to a multitude of vocal issues! Try to approach singing with a “beginner’s mind”
- Vocal issues can also occur if you are unconsciously attempting to sing certain pitches in the wrong register (for instance, bringing chest voice too high instead of transitioning into mix voice for higher notes)
- For help with tension in your voice, pain or discomfort while singing and/or speaking, search YouTube for “semi-occluded vocal tract exercises” or “SOVT” for singing and/or speech therapy
- You may need to retrain your breath support, especially for high notes, since thicker vocal cords may require a different kind of breath energy

FOR MORE INFORMATION, VISIT
[PETERFULLERTON.COM/TRANS-RESOURCES](https://peterfullerton.com/trans-resources)