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Hearing Loss: A Common Problem for Older Adults

Hearing loss is a common problem caused by noise, aging, disease, and heredity.

Nurse giving older woman an ear exam

People with hearing loss may find it hard to have conversations with friends and family. They may also have trouble understanding a doctor's advice, responding to warnings, and hearing doorbells and alarms.

Approximately one in three people between the ages of 65 and 74 has hearing loss, and nearly half of those older than 75 has difficulty hearing. But, some people may not want to admit they have trouble hearing.

Older people who can't hear well may become depressed, or they may withdraw from others because they feel frustrated or embarrassed about not understanding what is being said. Sometimes, older people are mistakenly thought to be confused, unresponsive, or uncooperative because they don't hear well.

Hearing problems that are ignored or untreated can get worse. If you have a hearing problem, see your doctor. Hearing aids, special training, certain medicines, and surgery are some of the treatments that can help.

Studies have shown that older adults with hearing loss have a greater risk of developing dementia than older adults with normal hearing. Cognitive abilities (including memory and concentration) decline faster in older adults with hearing loss than in older adults with normal hearing. Treating hearing problems may be important for cognitive health. See [What's the Connection Between Hearing and Cognitive Health?](#)

Signs of Hearing Loss

Some people have a hearing problem and don't realize it. You should see your doctor if you:

- Have trouble hearing over the telephone
- Find it hard to follow conversations when two or more people are talking
- Often ask people to repeat what they are saying
- Need to turn up the TV volume so loud that others complain
- Have a problem hearing because of background noise
- Think that others seem to mumble
- Can't understand when women and children speak to you

Types of Hearing Loss

Hearing loss comes in many forms. It can range from a mild loss, in which a person misses certain high-pitched sounds, such as the voices of women and children, to a total loss of hearing.

There are two general categories of hearing loss:

- Sensorineural hearing loss occurs when there is damage to the inner ear or the auditory nerve. This type of hearing loss is usually permanent.
- Conductive hearing loss occurs when sound waves cannot reach the inner ear. The cause may be earwax buildup, fluid, or a punctured eardrum. Medical treatment or surgery can usually restore conductive hearing loss.

Sudden Hearing Loss

Sudden sensorineural hearing loss, or sudden deafness, is a rapid loss of hearing. It can happen to a person all at once or over a period of up to 3 days. It should be considered a medical emergency. If you or someone you know experiences sudden sensorineural hearing loss, visit a doctor immediately.

Age-Related Hearing Loss (Presbycusis)

Presbycusis, or age-related hearing loss, comes on gradually as a person gets older. It seems to run in families and may occur because of changes in the inner ear and

auditory nerve. Presbycusis may make it hard for a person to tolerate loud sounds or to hear what others are saying.

Age-related hearing loss usually occurs in both ears, affecting them equally. The loss is gradual, so someone with presbycusis may not realize that he or she has lost some of his or her ability to hear.

Ringling in the Ears (Tinnitus)

Tinnitus is also common in older people. It is typically described as ringing in the ears, but it also can sound like roaring, clicking, hissing, or buzzing. It can come and go. It might be heard in one or both ears, and it may be loud or soft. Tinnitus is sometimes the first sign of hearing loss in older adults. Tinnitus can accompany any type of hearing loss and can be a sign of other health problems, such as high blood pressure, allergies, or as a side effect of medications.

Tinnitus is a symptom, not a disease. Something as simple as a piece of earwax blocking the ear canal can cause tinnitus, but it can also be the result of a number of health conditions.

Causes of Hearing Loss

Loud noise is one of the most common causes of hearing loss. Noise from lawnmowers, snow blowers, or loud music can damage the inner ear, resulting in permanent hearing loss. Loud noise also contributes to tinnitus. You can prevent most noise-related hearing loss. Protect yourself by turning down the sound on your stereo, television, or headphones; moving away from loud noise; or using earplugs or other ear protection.

Earwax or fluid buildup can block sounds that are carried from the eardrum to the inner ear. If wax blockage is a problem, talk with your doctor. He or she may suggest mild treatments to soften earwax.

A punctured ear drum can also cause hearing loss. The eardrum can be damaged by infection, pressure, or putting objects in the ear, including cotton-tipped swabs. See your doctor if you have pain or fluid draining from the ear.

Health conditions common in older people, such as diabetes or high blood pressure, can contribute to hearing loss. Viruses and bacteria (including the ear infection otitis media), a heart condition, stroke, brain injury, or a tumor may also affect your hearing.

Hearing loss can also result from taking certain medications. “Ototoxic” medications damage the inner ear, sometimes permanently. Some ototoxic drugs include medicines used to treat serious infections, cancer, and heart disease. Some antibiotics are ototoxic. Even aspirin at some dosages can cause problems. Check with your doctor if you notice a problem while taking a medication.

Heredity can cause hearing loss, as well. But not all inherited forms of hearing loss take place at birth. Some forms can show up later in life. For example, in [otosclerosis](#), which is thought to be a hereditary disease, an abnormal growth of bone prevents structures within the ear from working properly.

How to Cope with Hearing Loss

If you notice signs of hearing loss, talk to your doctor. If you have trouble hearing, you should:

- Let people know you have a hearing problem.
- Ask people to face you and to speak more slowly and clearly. Also, ask them to speak louder without shouting.
- Pay attention to what is being said and to facial expressions or gestures.
- Let the person talking know if you do not understand what he or she said.
- Ask the person speaking to reword a sentence and try again.
- Find a good location to listen. Place yourself between the speaker and sources of noise and look for quieter places to talk.

The most important thing you can do if you think you have a hearing problem is to seek professional advice. Your family doctor may be able to diagnose and treat your hearing problem. Or, your doctor may refer you to other experts, like an otolaryngologist (ear, nose, and throat doctor) or an audiologist (health professional who can identify and measure hearing loss).

Tips: How to Talk with Someone with Hearing Loss

Here are some tips you can use when talking with someone who has a hearing problem:

- In a group, include people with hearing loss in the conversation.
- Find a quiet place to talk to help reduce background noise, especially in restaurants and at social gatherings.
- Stand in good lighting and use facial expressions or gestures to give clues.
- Face the person and speak clearly. Maintain eye contact.
- Speak a little more loudly than normal, but don't shout. Try to speak slowly, but naturally.
- Speak at a reasonable speed.
- Do not hide your mouth, eat, or chew gum while speaking.
- Repeat yourself if necessary, using different words.
- Try to make sure only one person talks at a time.
- Be patient. Stay positive and relaxed.
- Ask how you can help.

Devices to Help with Hearing Loss

Your doctor or specialist may suggest you get a hearing aid. Hearing aids are electronic, battery-run devices that make sounds louder. There are many types of

hearing aids. Before buying a hearing aid, find out if your health insurance will cover the cost. Also, ask if you can have a trial period so you can make sure the device is right for you. An audiologist or hearing aid specialist will show you how to use your hearing aid.

[Assistive-listening devices](#), mobile apps, alerting devices, and [cochlear implants](#) can help some people with hearing loss. Cochlear implants are electronic devices for people with severe hearing loss. They don't work for all types of hearing loss. Alert systems can work with doorbells, smoke detectors, and alarm clocks to send you visual signals or vibrations. For example, a flashing light can let you know someone is at the door or the phone is ringing. Some people rely on the vibration setting on their cell phones to alert them to calls.

Over-the-counter (OTC) hearing aids are a new category of regulated hearing devices that adults with mild-to-moderate hearing loss will be able to buy without a prescription. OTC hearing aids will make certain sounds louder to help people with hearing loss listen, communicate, and take part more fully in daily activities. OTC hearing aids are expected to become available in stores and online in the next few years.

Talk with your doctor about what's right for you. Learn more about hearing loss from the National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders.

For More Information About Hearing Loss

National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders

1-800-241-1044 (toll-free)

1-800-241-1055 (TTY/toll-free)

nidcdinfo@nidcd.nih.gov

www.nidcd.nih.gov

American Speech-Language-Hearing Association

1-800-638-8255 (toll-free)

1-301-296-5650 (TTY/toll-free)

actioncenter@asha.org

www.asha.org

American Tinnitus Association

1-800-634-8978 (toll-free)

tinnitus@ata.org

www.ata.org

Hearing Loss Association of America

1-301-657-2248

www.hearingloss.org

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