

Hearing Loss

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Of our seven senses, hearing is most commonly affected as we age. About one fourth of people between 65 and 74 years old and one-half of people age 75 and older experience some trouble with hearing.

Q . Why do many people become hard of hearing as they age?

A . It is normal to lose the ability to hear high-pitched sounds as we age; however, several factors, such as diet, noise, stress, past injuries, family history and other medical conditions affect hearing.

Q . It does not bother me that I am hard of hearing. Why should I speak to my doctor about it?

A . Hearing loss affects people differently. If it does not disrupt your usual activities, it may not be severe and may seem less important for you to address. It is likely, however, that you are unaware of how much you are missing. You may also be affecting those around you by keeping the television or radio at a high volume or requiring people to repeat themselves several times before you understand what is being said to you.

Q . What should I do if I notice I'm no longer hearing very well?

A . If you experience trouble hearing, you should visit your health care provider for an assessment that focuses on the ears, head and neck. Your provider may be able to identify the cause for the hearing loss and begin treatment quickly. If there are no outside factors causing the hearing loss, your health care provider can recommend that an audiologist conduct hearing tests to determine the type of hearing loss you have and suggest the right assistive device for you.

Q . I was told that excess earwax is blocking my ears. What can I do about that?

A . Build-up of earwax often worsens hearing. You can use over-the-counter eardrops (such as Cerumenex, Murine EarDrops, and Debrox) to soften the wax. You should follow the instructions that come with the drops, and after you put them in your ears, cover them with cotton and let the drops sit for at least 15 minutes. If the drops do not completely dissolve the wax, it may be necessary to have your health care provider remove the wax in his or her office.

Q . What if I need a hearing aid?

A . Hearing aids are not for everyone-you must want to wear the hearing aid and should find one in a style that you like, or else you may never wear it. The wearer must be able to put the hearing aid into his or her ear, and adjust it as necessary, which can be difficult for those with bad arthritis or memory problems.

Q . What kinds of hearing aids are available?

A . Hearing aids can be expensive, depending on the type you choose. Some hearing aids adjust volume automatically. Others help reduce background noise so you can focus on conversations with others and not be distracted by other sounds. More expensive hearing aids can be set for either a quiet or noisy environment.

Q . What if I don't want to wear a hearing aid? Do I have other choices?

A . For people who have problems with coordination or memory, assistive listening devices (ALDs) may be a better choice. They are bigger than a hearing aid (usually pocket size) and easy to handle. People using an ALD wear a headset that is attached to a microphone that others speak into. The wearer is able to adjust volume as necessary. There are other ALDs that can be helpful for use with televisions (such as closed caption decoding devices) and over the telephone. There are also alerting devices such as lights that flash, vibrating alarms, and hearing ear dogs.

Q . If I know someone who is hard of hearing, what are some tips for speaking clearly so he or she understands what I am saying?

A . Hearing loss is often frustrating for those who suffer from it, and it can lead to a feeling of isolation from the rest of the world. Cooperation among families, friends, health care providers and the audiologist can help make communication with the person who is hard of hearing easier. Here are some tips that may help when speaking to someone who is hard of hearing:

- Stand two to three feet away from the person when speaking.
- Make sure the person looks at you when you speak.
- Lessen background noise when talking by turning off the television, radio or running water.
- It may be helpful if the person is in front of a wall to help reflect sound back.
- Use a lower-pitched voice.
- Speak slowly and distinctly, do not shout.
- Rephrase rather than repeat.
- Pause at the end of phrases or ideas.

Q . Where can I get more information on hearing loss?

A . American Academy of Audiology

8300 Greensboro Drive, Suite 750 o McLean, Virginia 22102
Phone: (800) AAA-2336 or (703) 790-8466 o Fax: (703) 790-8631
Internet: www.audiology.org/consumer/

National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders
National Institutes of Health
31 Center Drive, MSC 2320 o Bethesda, MD 20892-2320
Internet: www.nidcd.nih.gov/health/pubs_hb/older.htm

