

## Dealing With Hearing Loss

### Q: What should I do if I think I have hearing loss?

**A:** If you think your hearing is growing weaker, the first step is to admit it. Then, schedule an appointment with your family doctor to discuss your choices. Hearing problems that go untreated can get worse.

Hearing loss is very common. 36 million Americans report some level of hearing impairment. The incidence of hearing loss grows as we age. Almost half of seniors age 75 or older have a hearing impairment. Men are more likely to experience hearing loss than women.

Some people may not admit they have trouble hearing. Older people who can't hear well may become depressed or withdrawn, feeling embarrassed about not understanding what's being said. These people may appear to be confused, unresponsive, or uncooperative—but it's because they don't hear well. People with hearing loss may find it hard to talk with friends and family, or have trouble understanding a doctor's advice, responding to warnings, or hearing doorbells and alarms.

There are a number of different kinds of hearing loss. Your doctor can help identify the type of loss you have. Hearing aids may be one treatment, but special training, certain medicines, and surgery are other options that can help people with hearing problems.

There are many factors that can cause hearing loss: aging, disease, long-term exposure to loud noise, and heredity. Hearing involves not only the ear's ability to detect sounds, but also the brain's ability to interpret those sounds. It can range from a mild loss, where you miss certain high-pitched sounds, such as the voices of women and children, to a total loss of hearing. Permanent damage can result from damage to your inner ear or auditory nerve. But a build-up of ear wax, fluid, or a punctured eardrum can prevent sound waves from reaching your inner ear. Medical treatment or surgery can restore this kind of hearing loss.

Sudden hearing loss, or sudden deafness, can happen all at once or over a period of up to 3 days. It should be considered a medical emergency, and you should visit a doctor immediately. But there is also a common form of hearing loss that

comes on slowly as a person ages. It can be due to changes in your inner ear, auditory nerve, middle ear, or outer ear. In addition to the causes noted above, head injury, infection, illness, certain prescription drugs, or circulation problems like high blood pressure, can lead to gradual hearing loss.

Another common symptom in elders is Tinnitus: a ringing, roaring, clicking, hissing, or buzzing sound that comes and goes, in one or both ears, loud or soft. Tinnitus is not a disease. It can come with any type of hearing loss—like a side effect of medications, or something as basic as a piece of earwax blocking the ear canal. Your doctor may refer you to an ENT (ear, nose and throat doctor) who will come up with a treatment plan. You may also be referred to an audiologist, who will test your ability to hear sounds of different pitch and loudness. The tests are painless. An audiologist can help you determine if you need a hearing aid, and help you choose the right one.

There are a number of different types of hearing aids to treat different kinds of hearing loss: devices worn behind the ear, worn inside the outer ear, or in the ear canal. Which hearing aid is right for you depends on the kind of hearing loss you have, and your own preferences. Wearing two hearing aids may help balance sounds, improve your understanding of words in noisy situations, and make it easier to locate the source of sounds. Some hearing aids may have a telecoil—a small magnetic coil that makes it easier to hear conversations over the telephone.

If your hearing loss is severe, your doctor may suggest a cochlear implant, which is a small electronic device a surgeon places under the skin and behind the ear. The implant picks up sounds, converts them to electrical signals, and sends them past the non-working part of the inner ear and on to the brain. Learning to interpret sounds from the implant takes time and practice.

To learn more about hearing loss, visit the National Institute of Health (NIH) SeniorHealth website:

<http://nihseniorhealth.gov/hearingloss/hearinglossdefined/01.html>