

Can You Hear Me Now?

Hearing Loss and Aging



By Moira Fordyce, MD

Hearing loss is common in older adults. Almost one in three over age 65 suffer from it. One in two age 75 and older have some problem with hearing.

Since it happens gradually, the person affected often doesn't realize it and thinks others are speaking too quietly. It's more common in men than in women. Smoking and loud noise both make hearing deteriorate faster.

The medical term for changes in hearing with normal aging is presbycusis. Another term for these changes is age-related hearing loss. This usually occurs in both ears and, unfortunately, is irreversible. What happens is as follows:

- High tones are lost as we age which makes sounds more muffled, like listening to the radio or music with the treble tuned out. This means that simply making sounds louder does not make them clearer.

- We become less able to screen out surrounding noise and focus on individual sounds. This is called the "cocktail party" phenomenon where it becomes increasingly difficult to make out what someone is saying to us in the midst of noise and chatter.

Hearing is more complex than many of us realize. It starts with a sound wave or vibration. The sound wave travels through the outer part of your ear (ear canal) and travels to the eardrum which is a thin membrane that separates the outer parts of the ear from the inner parts.

When the eardrum vibrates, three tiny bones (auditory ossicles) send the vibration to the cochlea (tiny spiral cavity with sensory cells) and from there the signals are carried by nerve fibers to the brain which processes and helps us understand and interpret sound.

Unfortunately, hearing loss is more than just an inconvenience. It can lead to depression, withdrawal, anger, loss of self-esteem and overall

unhappiness with life. There's even some evidence it can affect your memory and other cognitive processes as well as your mobility.

We don't realize how much feedback we get from our hearing when out walking, for example. Hearing contributes to good balance.

Hearing loss makes communicating with others more difficult. This can lead to misunderstandings with family and friends and can even jeopardize your health if you cannot communicate well with your healthcare professional. Also, if you cannot hear an approaching vehicle, this could result in an accident.

The first step in dealing with hearing loss is to have your doctor evaluate your hearing, general health and review all your medications including prescription and those bought at the pharmacy without prescription – some medications, for example aspirin, can affect hearing at any age. Your work history and exposure to loud noise is also important to consider.

Any health problem such as high blood pressure or diabetes should be treated and if you smoke, stop now.

Wax in the ears is common and can be a reason for dull hearing but is easily removed once it is diagnosed. Your health professional must make looking in the ears with an otoscope a routine part of a good physical examination.

If a hearing aid or another assistive listening device is an option, an audiologist can do a detailed evaluation of your hearing loss and recommend the best type of hearing aid for you. Some people with presbycusis may benefit from a telephone amplifier to help hear speech on the telephone.

If your hearing loss is severe and not helped by a hearing aid, a cochlear implant device might improve matters. Your health professional will discuss the pros and cons of this procedure.

Got a question for Dr. Moira Fordyce?
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