



Hearing Care

Fact:

28 million Americans have hearing problems.

Fiction:

It's a myth that you should remove earwax.

Prevention:

Many forms of hearing loss can be prevented.

Treatment:

Hearing aids should be individually fitted, not purchased through the mail.

Hearing loss often goes undiagnosed. As a result, people can suffer a variety of problems with learning, remembering or communicating—all because they cannot hear properly.

Understanding Hearing

Hearing is the result of a complex series of mechanical, chemical and electrical reactions. As sound waves in the air enter the ear, the sounds cause the eardrum to vibrate. These vibrations move through three tiny bones in the middle ear. The bones help amplify the vibrations, which then move into the inner ear.

The inner ear is filled with special fluid and is lined with hair cells. These specialized cells are responsible for interpreting the vibrations in such a way that nerve impulses are triggered. These impulses are carried to the brain, where they are interpreted as sound. Because of its delicacy, the hearing pathway is subject to problems at many points.

Common Causes of Hearing Loss

Hearing loss can be caused by:

- Dangerously loud noises that damage the inner ear either through one-time exposure (such as attending a rock concert) or years of exposure to moderate noise (such as lawn mowers or hair dryers)
- Natural aging, which most often causes presbycusis (the loss of high-pitched sounds)
- Infection and disease, including bacterial meningitis and German measles
- Genetics—any of some 100 hereditary syndromes
- Medications, including certain chemotherapy drugs and antibiotics

Who Has Hearing Loss?

About 28 million Americans suffer from some sort of hearing loss. Hearing loss can affect young and old alike, but it is most common in people age 65 and older. In fact, about a third of all people past this age and about half of all people over 85 have some form of hearing loss.*

Prevention

An ounce of prevention is worth a great deal when it comes to preventing many types of hearing loss. Measures include:

- Wearing earplugs or other hearing protective devices when involved in loud

- activities, such as using power tools
- Protecting children from loud noises
- Turning down the volume when using earphones or listening to music in the car
- Following all hearing loss prevention procedures at work
- Getting prompt medical care for an ear infection, ear pain or suspected hearing loss
- Having the proper immunizations against measles and other diseases
- Following the doctor's advice for medical conditions that can cause hearing loss, including high blood pressure
- Keeping objects, including cotton swabs, out of ears
- Always wearing safety belts in a car
- Using protective headgear while bike riding or roller skating

There are a few don'ts:

- Don't worry about earwax. Ears are designed to be self-cleaning.
- Don't put anything in the ears
- Don't try to clean inside the ear
- Don't try to remove anything stuck in the ear. See a doctor.

Measuring Hearing Loss

Hearing loss is measured in decibels (DB) and is divided into four categories:

- Mild hearing loss of 15 to 40 DB, where you cannot hear a whispered conversation in a quiet atmosphere at close range
- Moderate hearing loss of 40 to 60 DB, where you cannot hear normal conversation in a quiet atmosphere at close range
- Severe hearing loss of 60 to 90 DB, where you cannot hear speech and can only hear loud noises, such as a lawn mower, at close range
- Profound hearing loss of more than 90 DB, where you cannot hear speech and can only hear extremely loud noises or feel the vibrating component of sound

Diagnosis and Treatment

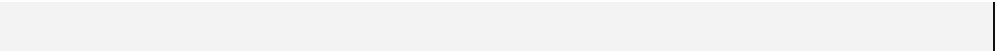
When hearing loss is suspected, a primary care provider may refer the patient to an otolaryngologist, a medical doctor who specializes in diseases and conditions of the ear, nose and throat. One or more diagnostic tests may be performed, including a pure tone test, an audiogram, X-rays, tympanometry and magnetic resonance imaging.

Helpful interventions can include the use of hearing aids and, more rarely, cochlear implants. Hearing aids should be custom fitted rather than purchased through the mail.

Here is a simple test to determine if you might have a hearing problem:

- Do you have to turn the volume up on the television or telephone?
- Do you frequently have to ask others to repeat what they said?
- Do you have difficulty understanding when talking in a group or in noisy situations?
- Do you sometimes not hear the phone or the doorbell?
- Have others told you that you don't seem to hear them?
- Did you ever spend a lot of time in a very noisy environment, either at home or at work?
- Do you have ringing or other noises (tinnitus) in your ears?
- Do you have more trouble understanding women or children talking?
- Do you avoid social situations because it's a strain to participate in conversation?
- Has anyone ever told you they think you have a hearing problem?

If you answered yes to three or more of these questions, you could have a hearing problem. You may want to talk with your physician about a referral to a hearing specialist.



* National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders (NIDCD)

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