



Signs, Symptoms, and Solutions for Hearing Loss

The patient would insist their hearing was fine. It was just that other people were mumbling, says Ashby-Scabis, senior director of audiology practices at the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA). Most times, she says, the test would show hearing loss.

If you've noticed other people talking too softly, found yourself annoyed by people speaking to you from other rooms, or found that your usual television or radio volume is creeping steadily upward, you might have hearing loss too. And if you do, you're in good company.

According to the National Institutes of Health (NIH), 15 percent of all adults have trouble hearing—a number that increases to 33 percent for people between ages 65 and 74 and nearly 50 percent for people over 75.

Hearing experts say it isn't surprising that most people don't know they're having trouble hearing, since hearing loss usually happens gradually over time. But missing or ignoring the signs can have profound consequences for your relationships, work, health, and safety.

How and Why Hearing Loss Happens

Age-related hearing loss is largely a matter of wear and tear on the inner ear and the nerves between our ears and brains, says Ashby-Scabis.

Your genes, and health conditions like diabetes and high blood pressure, can raise your risk of hearing loss, says Patricia Gaffney, a professor at Nova Southeastern University in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, and president-elect of the American Academy of Audiology.

Noise exposure also matters. Too many loud concerts or a noisy job without ear protection can damage your hearing over time. “But most people don’t really notice the damage on a day-to-day basis because it’s such a gradual change,” says Gaffney.

“The first thing people might notice is that, when they enter a noisy environment, it’s much harder to have a conversation,” she says. “They may also start to find other people’s speech less clear, especially the voices of women and children, because hearing at higher pitches declines fastest.” When people start to lose their ability to hear high pitches, they’ll hear mostly low pitches instead. These sound like mumbling, hence the common complaint.

Turning up the TV and asking others to speak up won’t fix the problem, says Gaffney. “If you have a faulty inner ear, no matter how loud we make it, it’s still not going to make things any clearer.”

Other warning signs, according to the NIH, include trouble understanding people over the phone, often asking people to repeat themselves, and struggling to understand a conversation when two or more people are talking. *Tinnitus*, or ringing in the ears, is another possible sign.

How Hearing Loss Impacts Your Life

HOW TO GET A HEARING TEST

Worried about signs of hearing loss in yourself or a loved one? The best way to get answers is with a hearing test. Professional tests, which cost \$85 to \$200, are typically covered by Medicare and many other insurers if you have signs of a hearing problem. Tests are offered by audiologists and by hearing instrument specialists, who are licensed at the state level to fit and dispense hearing aids.

In some cases, an audiologist or your primary care doctor will refer you to an ear, nose, and throat specialist. This is common if it seems like your hearing problem might have a medical cause.

If you don't want to go straight to a doctor, you might start by using an app that assesses your basic hearing level. Two popular options are Mimi and Sonic Cloud. Both are available for Android and iOS devices. In the fall of 2024, the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health will begin offering its own free Hearing Number app.

ASHA reports that adults who know they have hearing loss are unlikely to do anything about it unless it gets severe. It's not unusual for people to wait 10 years or longer to consider hearing aids, the primary form of treatment. "Over those years, you're missing out on so much," says Gaffney.

Studies have linked untreated hearing loss to depression, anxiety, and social isolation, says Laura

Coco, an assistant professor of audiology at San Diego State University. “As communication gets harder, people just slowly drop out from their communities and their families.”

Working adults can lose confidence in their ability to do good work, she says. Untreated hearing loss is linked with lost income and a higher rate of unemployment, according to the nonprofit Hearing Health Foundation.

It’s even linked to a higher risk of falling, perhaps because poor hearing creates a “sense of disorientation,” says Ashby-Scabis.

In the past few years, researchers have also found an increasingly strong connection between hearing loss and cognitive decline. First, researchers at Johns Hopkins University found that people with mild hearing loss were twice as likely to develop dementia as those with normal hearing and that those with moderate to severe hearing loss were at even higher risk.

More recently, the same researchers found that getting hearing aids led to a 50 percent drop in the rate of cognitive decline in older adults who had both hearing loss and an elevated risk for dementia.

It is important to note that the studies don’t prove that hearing loss leads to dementia because correlation is not causation. “One thought is that there’s a common cause that leads to both dementia and hearing loss,” says Coco.

If untreated hearing loss does increase the risk, isolation could be the link, she says. We’re social creatures, and when we lose connection, our brains suffer.

Another consideration is that untreated hearing loss can make someone seem like they have memory problems when they don’t. “When you don’t hear what people are saying, you can’t remember it,” says Ashby-Scabis. “That’s another reason to get answers and get help.”

Article by Kim Painter

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