

Handling Hearing Loss

If you have difficulty hearing, you may feel isolated and frustrated—but you don't have to. Hear better and feel happier with the right hearing aids.

By Patricia Prijatel

No matter how hard you try to hide your hearing loss, eventually your friends and family members will notice. And the truth is, you don't need to hide it—and you'll be happier if you don't.

One in every three adults older than 60 has some form of hearing loss, according to the National Institutes of Health. Long-term noise, heredity, and illnesses, such as ear infections, take a toll on your auditory system as you age.

Contrary to popular belief, baby boomers are no more prone to hearing problems than their predecessors, says Lisa Smeallie, an audiologist at Georgetown University Hospital. That's because they've benefited from better hearing protection in the military and workplace, even with all that rock 'n' roll. Still, as the number of older Americans increases, the number of folks with hearing loss also grows.

If you have trouble hearing, you don't have to suffer in silence. Take this advice to hear better today.

Look for Signs

Common signs of hearing loss include needing to ask people to repeat themselves, trouble hearing in a crowd or on the telephone, and a sense that others are mumbling. Typically, Smeallie says, you lose the ability to hear higher frequencies as you age, so you can hear only parts of conversations and are

more likely to understand people with deep voices. "Consonants spoken by a person will be easier to hear than vowels," Smeallie says. "So speech may sound loud but lack clarity."

Less obvious, Smeallie says, are two telltale signs: sensitivity to loud noises and tinnitus. And while tinnitus, or ringing in the ears, can be an initial sign of hearing problems, it can also be caused by medicines and other illnesses such as inner ear infections.

Get Tested Accurately

Always get tested by a licensed audiologist in a soundproof booth, says Patricia Kricos, president of the American Academy of Audiology and professor of speech, language, and hearing sciences at the University of Florida. Office tests allow too much outside noise to contaminate results.

The audiologist will test the entire auditory system—eardrum, middle ear, and inner ear—before deciding the best treatment and recommending other medical intervention.

Invest in Hearing Aids

"People with hearing loss who use hearing aids have a much higher quality of life, feel more confident, and have fewer health problems," Kricos says.

Today's hearing aids are actually tiny computers programmed for you. Their basic

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Hearing Loss and Alzheimer's

A new study by Johns Hopkins Medical Institutes has found that older adults who experience hearing loss may be at an increased risk of dementia. According to the study, the risk of dementia and Alzheimer's increased as hearing loss worsened. For every 10 decibels of hearing loss, the risk of dementia increased by 20 percent.

"Hearing loss can mimic dementia," says Patricia Kricos, president of the American Academy of Audiology and professor of speech language hearing sciences at the University of Florida. So it's possible that dementia is overdiagnosed in patients with hearing loss, but it's also possible that the two illnesses have similar causes.

"More research is needed to determine whether hearing loss is an antecedent or a consequence of dementia," Kricos says.

If you have hearing loss, make sure you carry a note to that effect in your purse or wallet. If not, and you have an accident, your caretakers may mistake poor hearing for confusion or dementia.



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goal is to amplify sound, especially high frequencies, but their capacity continues to evolve with technology. Work with a doctor to determine which one is right for you.

Hearing aids come in three basic styles: behind-the-ear (BTE), in-the-ear (ITE), and canal. BTE hearing aids consist of a plastic piece fitted inside your ear that connects to another piece hooked behind your ear. ITE hearing aids fit in your outer ear and often come with a telecoil, a small magnetic coil that transfers sound through the aid rather than a microphone. Canal hearing aids come in two different styles. An in-the-canal (ITC) hearing aid is specially made to fit your ear canal, and a completely-in-canal (CIC) hearing aid is hidden within your canal.

In addition to choosing the style of your hearing aid, you can also choose how it perceives sound. The two most common forms of hearing aid technology are analog and digital. Analog hearing aids are the most basic. Though they're not always computer-programmable, they're often sufficient for improving minor hearing loss. Some models allow the audiologist to create different settings for quiet, noisy, or large environments.

Digital hearing devices separate sounds to distinguish treble, bass, and midlevel noises. These hearing aids use digital sound processing to convert sound waves into digital signals, helping match an individual's hearing loss across changing frequencies and pitches. These aids are often self-adjusting to improve ease of use.

Cochlear implants are an option for those with severe hearing loss who do not benefit from hearing aids. These electronic devices are surgically implanted in the inner ear and require a serious commitment from the user. "It takes some time to get used to how people sound and understand the heard words," Kricos says.

Assisted Listening and Alerting Devices

Many public buildings throughout the country are now wired with electromagnetic coils that connect directly to hearing aids to amplify and clarify sounds. Called looping systems, they've been installed in theaters, museums, places of worship, and even the ticket booths in the New York subway system, Smeallie says. And it may be cost effective to wire a room in your house, but keep in mind, loops require hearing aids with built-in telecoils.

Another system uses FM receivers to link hearing aids to microphones for use in presentations and meetings. "It's as though the person is right next to you," Smeallie says. Alerting devices—usually flashing lights or vibrations—can be connected to smoke detectors, alarm clocks, and doorbells, which have high-frequency sounds often missed by those with hearing loss. These are especially important at night, when many folks take out their hearing aids. ■

For more information about dealing with hearing loss, visit TransitionsLCS.com.



Learn more about hearing loss by going to the American Academy of Audiology (HowsYourHearing.org) the Better Hearing Institute (BetterHearing.org), or the Hearing Loss Association of America (HearingLoss.org).