



## March 2009 Health Bulletin

# Older Adults & Hearing Loss

Being able to hear clearly is something many of us take for granted, until we notice a problem. Unfortunately, hearing loss is one of the most common conditions affecting older adults and their ability to communicate. It is estimated that one-third of older adults (ages 65 to 74) and almost half of older individuals (age 75 and older) have hearing loss.

### Older adults with hearing loss may find it difficult to:

- Carry on conversations with family and friends
- Hear a doorbell or an alarm
- Hear an approaching car as they cross the street
- Understand a doctor's advice or directions
- Interpret someone's emotions by the tone of their voice



Hearing loss can range from an inability to hear high-pitched sounds, like a woman's or child's voice, to total hearing loss. Hearing loss can run in families, or it can be caused by disease, trauma, certain medications, or being exposed to loud noises over a long period of time.

## Two Common Hearing Loss Categories

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Sensorineural</b> (sen-suh-ree-noor-uhl)           <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• This type of hearing loss is permanent</li> <li>• Nerve damage to the inner ear</li> </ul> </li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Conductive</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Temporary hearing loss that can usually be restored</li> <li>• Earwax build-up</li> <li>• Fluid in the ear</li> <li>• Punctured eardrum</li> </ul> </li> </ul> |
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## Conditions that Commonly Affect Older Adults

- **Presbycusis** ("Presby" means elder and "cusis" means hearing)
  - Age-related hearing loss
- **Tinnitus**
  - High-pitched "ringing, hissing, or roaring" sound
  - Commonly caused by exposure to loud noises and certain medications
  - Tinnitus is not a disease, but a symptom
  - Tinnitus can come and go, can persist, or suddenly stop

## Warning Signs of Hearing Loss

- Trouble hearing when on the telephone
- Difficulty understanding or following conversations when two or more people are talking
- Turning up the TV or radio volume so loud that others complain
- Trouble hearing what people are saying because of background noise
- Sounds are muffled
- People sound like they are mumbling when they speak
- Trouble understanding when women and children speak
- Constantly asking people to repeat themselves and to speak louder
- Often being accused of not paying attention
- Often hear a ringing, hissing, or roaring sound
- Strain to hear a conversation
- Gradual loss of interest in talking with people

## Treatment Options

Surprisingly, elderly individuals with significant hearing loss will often wait as long as 10 years before seeking help. Early detection is the first step in the treatment of hearing loss in the elderly. All older adults should be routinely screened for hearing loss and communication problems.

Treatment options include:

- Hearing aids
- Assistive devices
- Surgical implants



## Tips for Talking with Someone with a Hearing Problem

- Face the person directly
- Speak clearly and not too fast
- Do not hide your mouth, eat, or chew gum while speaking
- Stand in a well-lit area
- Try to reduce background noise
- Use facial expressions or gestures to give helpful clues
- Repeat yourself if necessary, using different words
- Don't exclude a person who is hearing impaired from conversation
- Talk with the person, not about the person in front of others
- Be patient with the person and remain relaxed
- Ask how you can help

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### Sources

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