

Why Some Seniors Lose Their Hearing

Have you had a lifetime of exposure to loud noises? You could be at risk for age-related hearing loss.



Key Takeaways

- Hearing loss is the third most common chronic health condition for seniors.
- Risk factors for hearing loss include smoking, a punctured eardrum, or even some medications.
- Untreated hearing loss can contribute to major social, emotional, and cognitive issues.

Do you have difficulty hearing conversations held in a noisy room? Do you have a harder time picking up women's voices than men's? Do you constantly ask others to repeat what they just said? If you answered 'yes' to these questions, you may be experiencing hearing loss — especially if you are 65 or older.

About 8.5 percent of adults between the ages of 55 and 64 suffer from hearing loss, according to the National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders. That number jumps to 25 percent for those 65 to 74, and it doubles to 50 percent for ages 75 and older. After high blood pressure and arthritis, hearing loss is the most common chronic condition affecting senior health.

What Causes Hearing Loss?

As you age, you are at risk for two types of hearing loss. The most common type of hearing loss in seniors is presbycusis, or age-related hearing loss. A gradual loss of hearing that affects both ears, presbycusis occurs when tiny hairs in the ear, which are necessary for converting sound waves to sound, become damaged or die. Hearing loss

from presbycusis is permanent because once these hairs are damaged or die, they are not replaced with new growth.

The other type of hearing loss that seniors experience is tinnitus, or ringing in the ears. Tinnitus can be either permanent or temporary.

Risk Factors Related to Hearing Loss

A lifetime of exposure to loud noises such as music, motorcycles, or firecrackers can cause hearing loss in seniors. Noise-related hearing loss often results in tinnitus. Other causes of and risk factors for hearing loss experienced by seniors include:

- Smoking
- Allergies, high blood pressure, tumors, or stroke
- Medications
- A punctured eardrum
- Viruses or bacteria
- Earwax buildup

Your genes may also play a role in presbycusis, as it tends to run in families.

Environmental factors like loud music and smoking make it difficult to determine the effect of genetics on age-related hearing loss; however, according to American Family Physician, an estimated 50 percent of age-related hearing loss is inherited.

Men are also more likely than women to develop hearing loss, and they're more likely to develop it at an earlier age, says American Family Physician.

The Consequences of Hearing Loss

Losing hearing can have a significant effect on other aspects of your wellbeing.

Researchers in a 2014 survey of 18,300 adults found that about 12 percent of participants with hearing loss had moderate to severe depression compared with about 5 percent of those with excellent hearing. The survey, which was published in JAMA Otolaryngology Head and Neck Surgery, also noted that women were particularly susceptible to depression related to hearing loss.

Hearing loss also appears to worsen cognitive functioning, according to a study published in the February 2013 issue of JAMA Internal Medicine. Among the nearly 2,000 seniors studied, hearing loss lowered cognitive functioning on some assessments as much as 41 percent more than it did among those without hearing loss.

Hearing Aids and Other Treatment Options

Though you can't always fully prevent hearing loss, you can take steps to minimize or overcome it. Age-related hearing loss may be prevented or at least lessened by avoiding loud noises.

Because there is no known cure for age-related hearing loss, treatment is generally focused on improving your ability to function day to day. Your doctor may treat you or refer you to a hearing specialist such as an otolaryngologist (or ENT, a medical doctor who specializes in the ear, nose, and throat) or an audiologist (a licensed professional who diagnoses and helps manage hearing problems). The cause and extent of your hearing loss will determine the course of treatment.

A hearing aid may be one recommendation from your doctor or audiologist. Hearing aids can be beneficial for many, but according to the National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders, fewer than 30 percent of adults older than 70 who could benefit from a hearing aid have one. Hearing aids have come a long way over the years and are available in a variety of styles. A hearing aid and its battery will either fit behind the ear, on the ear, just inside the ear, or in the ear canal.

Types of hearing aids include:

- Analog hearing aids that increase the volume of some sounds while lowering the volume of others
- Digital hearing aids that allow you to determine which sounds to make louder or lower

Using assistive listening devices also can help compensate for hearing loss. These products either amplify sound, such as sound from telephones, televisions, and radio listening systems, or alert the user visually, such as with smoke detectors or alarm clocks.

Surgery may be another consideration. Cochlear implants are electronic devices with one part surgically implanted in the skin and the other part worn behind or in the ear. Used only for severe hearing loss, implants will not restore normal hearing, but they can make sounds louder. Because of the nature of the implants, they are not without risks — they pose the potential for infection, damage to the facial nerve, and tinnitus.

Speech or lip reading and sign language may be an answer for some seniors with hearing loss. Both of these techniques require training and practice and are generally recommended for those with severe hearing loss.

See your doctor as soon as you think you have a hearing problem. The loss of hearing could be a symptom of another medical condition. Seniors with untreated hearing loss are also more likely to suffer emotionally and socially when they are unable to interact with friends and family members. Left untreated, hearing loss could lead to deafness, and seniors who do not address their hearing loss put their lives at risk if they are unable to hear emergency warnings such as car horns or smoke alarms.

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