

BOTTOM LINE PERSONAL

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DO YOU HAVE SIGNS OF HEARING LOSS AND WHAT CAN YOU DO ABOUT IT?

More than 28 million people, 10 percent of all Americans and one in three over 60, suffer from hearing loss. It's one of the most common health problems as we age, and it affects us much sooner than it used to. But almost half of us never seek help. We are in denial, or just embarrassed to admit the problem. Why let it keep you from every day conversations, make you miss out on important information, or cause unnecessary stress or fatigue?

WHY IT HAPPENS

Most hearing loss develops gradually over 25 to 30 years. By age 50 or 60 there can be noticeable deterioration, usually caused by a combination of aging, family history and exposure to loud noises. But even younger baby boomers, and our kids too, are suffering from the effects of playing stereos or headphones too loud, the noise level at concerts or sporting events, heavy traffic, power toys like motorcycles or snowmobiles, or power tools used for hobbies, yard work or on the job. And, a single loud noise like a gunshot can do permanent damage. Hearing loss can also result from head injuries, a virus or bacteria, other medical conditions, or certain medications.

KNOW THE SIGNS

Often, it's the people around you who notice the problem before you do. But, you will find that you are misunderstanding conversations and asking people to repeat what they said. You might think people are mumbling, not be able to hear on the telephone, or constantly crank up the volume on the TV or stereo. Some people could also have a ringing, hissing or roaring sound in their ears. Restaurants, other noisy rooms or places with large crowds are a problem, and listening to speakers at meetings. Don't let it get to the point that you are staying home to avoid these situations, or worn out from coping. This can put a strain on your family and work relationships.

PREVENTING THE PROBLEM

Avoid loud sounds! But always use ear protection if you have to be in a noisy environment or operate loud equipment! For every day use, a good foam earplug from your drugstore will do the trick. Or, an Audiologist can advise you which protective device is best for your needs. Even professional musicians have learned a lesson and most now wear custom earplugs or earphones, and use special devices that allow them to

hear the music at safer levels while they perform. And check with your physician about the side effects of your prescription medications. Some can affect hearing.

WHAT YOU CAN DO ABOUT IT

Make sure you get a professional evaluation by a licensed Audiologist, ranging from \$95 to \$150 depending on which tests you need. Audiologists are trained to determine the type of hearing loss you have, help you understand how the loss will affect you, and explore with you the best solutions for your particular problem. In the few cases that require medical or surgical treatment, they will refer you to the appropriate physician specialist. Most insurers will pay for the initial evaluation. But you need to check your policy to see if hearing aids or other assistive listening devices are covered.

Hearing aids:

Over 95 percent of people with hearing loss can benefit from either analog or digital hearing aids. They come in a wide range of sizes and styles and your Audiologist will recommend the right one for your individual needs. There are in the ear hearing aids (ITE), behind the ear (BTE), in the canal (ITC), and completely in the canal (CIC). Cost can range from \$800 for a lower end analog hearing aid, up to \$3,000 for a digital hearing aid with multiple channel devices and programming capabilities. Cochlear implants are used for more profound or severe hearing loss.

Other options:

Sometimes the most appropriate treatment is not a hearing aid. Your Audiologist can tell you about other ways to compensate for hearing impairment. This could include reading lips, improved listening skills or assistive listening devices (ALD) for home or work. ALDs like TV and telephone amplifiers, personal listening systems, direct audio input hearing aids, and sound systems for public places like meeting rooms and movie theaters, bring the sound closer to the person with the hearing loss and can really help.

Bottom Line Personal interviewed Dr. Angela Loavenbruck, President of the American Academy of Audiology. She has a private practice in New City, New York, is on the faculty of Nova Southeastern University in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, and is the co-author of *Hearing Aid Dispensing for Audiologists*.