Hearing Loss & What You Can do About It

Sometimes hearing loss can play tricks on us. (Photo: Shutterstock)
Is it time to have your hearing checked? Experts talk about the importance of testing and using aids when needed.

Hearing loss is one of the most common conditions afflicting older adults in the United States. Roughly one in three people in the U.S. between the ages of 65 and 74 has hearing loss, and nearly half of people over 75 years old have difficulty hearing, according to national data.

Yet, many don’t seek treatment for it or shun hearing aids because of the stigma. “It’s one of those things that we need to continue to provide public awareness on,” said Janel Cosby, an audiologist and lecturer at the University of Central Florida.

It may seem easier to just raise the volume or ask a loved one to repeat what they said, but hearing loss can have a significant impact on your quality of life, experts say.

People can get anxious and depressed. They may isolate themselves. And new findings show that hearing loss is also associated with developing cognitive deficits such as dementia in the long run.

“It’s a silent disease,” said Cosby. “Research shows that on average, once a person internally admits or is aware of hearing loss, it usually takes them seven to 10 years to seek treatment.” And in the meantime, the hearing loss continues to get worse.

“It’s like watching the sunset,” said Dr. Michael Seidman, director of otologic/neurologic/skull base surgery and medical director of Wellness and Integrative Medicine at Florida Hospital Celebration Health. “You could sit and watch it until suddenly it’s black. [The change] is subtle.”

THE CAUSE

There are different types of hearing loss, but most age-related conditions happen in the inner-most part of the ear, when tiny nerve fibers are damaged.

Hearing loss in most older adults is caused by a combination of age and exposure to loud noises over time.

You may shake your head and think back to all the loud concerts you’ve attended, but the sources of those damaging noises are much closer to you than you think.

Any sound that’s 85 decibels or louder can cause hearing loss or hearing problems, and that can include your blow-dryer and lawnmower. Seidman recommends wearing ear plugs even when drying your hair.

Other conditions such as diabetes, high blood pressure and some medications can also contribute to hearing loss. So it’s a good idea to get a baseline hearing test so you can compare your results over time.
THE DOCTOR
You can see different types of specialists for hearing loss. You can start with your primary care physician, or go to an otolaryngologist (ENT), an audiologist or a hearing aid specialist.

While the ENT tries to find out why you’re having hearing problems and offer treatment options, the audiologist has specialized training in determining the type and gauging the degree of your hearing loss, and fitting you with hearing aids, according to the National Institutes of Health. Meanwhile, hearing aid specialists are licensed by the state to do basic hearing tests and fit hearing aids.

A decent hearing test should take at least half an hour, said Seidman, preferably in a sound booth, under controlled conditions.

Then your provider will give you several hearing aid options, which can be a bit overwhelming, but most programs offer a trial period so you can test the hearing aid and make sure it is a comfortable fit. For many, cost can also be prohibitive, because most insurances don’t cover hearing aids.

“Everybody expects hearing aids to be like eyeglasses and unfortunately, they’re not,” said Seidman. There are more than a dozen hearing aid manufacturers in the U.S., making products that vary in shape, size and sophistication.

THE TECHNOLOGY
“The hearing aid technology has changed and it’s not the hearing aid that your grandparents used to have,” said Cosby. “The technology has evolved so much that I can adjust the software of my patients’ hearing aids through the cloud... Consumers can now download an app and they’re able to use their cellphones to change their hearing aid program instead of touching the buttons on their hearing aids.”

There are also newer surgical options to implant a processor or hearing aid at the side of the head or in the ear.

Some startups are also trying to break into the market by making earbuds that amplify sounds, but experts say that their amplification levels fall far below what’s needed for individuals with moderate or severe hearing loss.

But before getting bogged down by details, seek a professional and have your hearing tested. Most insurances cover this part.

“My hope is that people realize that there’s no shame in having hearing loss,” said Cosby. “It’s something that’s treatable and the technology is such that it provides a better quality of life for those who have hearing aids. We don’t want you to put your hearing aids in a drawer. That doesn’t do any good to your ear or your brain.”

Can You Hear Me?
Sometimes hearing loss can play tricks on us. The National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders has provided the following questions that could help you determine whether your hearing ability is being challenged.

If you answer yes to three or more of these questions, you might want to have your hearing checked.

**Do you sometimes feel embarrassed when you meet new people because you struggle to hear?**

YES or NO

**Do you feel frustrated when talking to members of your family because you have difficulty hearing them?**

YES or NO

**Do you have difficulty hearing or understanding co-workers, clients or customers?**

YES or NO

**Do you feel restricted or limited by a hearing problem?**

YES or NO

**Do you have difficulty hearing when visiting friends, relatives or neighbors?**

YES or NO

**Do you have trouble hearing in the movies or in the theater?**

YES or NO

**Does a hearing problem cause you to argue with family members?**

YES or NO

**Do you have difficulty hearing when visiting friends, relatives or neighbors?**

YES or NO
Do you have trouble hearing the TV or radio at levels that are loud enough for others?

YES or NO

Do you feel that any difficulty with your hearing limits your personal or social life?

YES or NO

Do you have trouble hearing family or friends when you are together in a restaurant?

YES or NO

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