

Hearing loss is a health problem and is not a benign condition

Hearing plays an important role in your mental, emotional and physical well-being. Hearing loss is the third most common chronic health condition affecting the aging population, and the numbers are increasing in younger populations as well. 20% of adults over 65, 40% over 75 and 80% of nursing home residents have a significant hearing problem. Furthermore, 6-12% of seniors experience speech, language or voice difficulties.

In some cases, hearing loss is a symptom of a more serious medical problem warranting intervention. In most people however, hearing loss is a chronic, non-pathological degenerative process that can be properly managed with hearing aids and other assistive listening devices. About 95% of all hearing losses occur in the cochlea, resulting in “sensorineural hearing loss”– what many people call “nerve deafness.” In sensorineural hearing loss, damage occurs to the cilia, or hair cells, in the inner ear, resulting in irreversible hearing loss. The most common causes of sensorineural hearing loss are noise exposure, aging and hereditary predisposition. Fortunately, the vast majority of persons with this sensorineural hearing loss respond very well to amplification. Only 5% of hearing losses are “conductive,” resulting from structural or mechanical damage to the outer ear and/or middle ear.

Hearing loss adversely affects hearing-impaired persons’ quality of life. Adverse effects on family relationships, enjoyment of social activities and work performance have all been carefully documented. Danger from failure to hear warning signals and even doctor’s instructions regarding medications have also been reported. Additionally, untreated hearing loss can cause social isolation, cause or worsen emotional disorders and strain interpersonal relationships. A hearing loss can be mistaken for inattentiveness, memory disorders or mental slowness.

The typically gradual onset of hearing loss may result in the patient being unaware (or in denial) of a problem. Family members and significant others are much more likely to notice and report the problem.

Following the completion of a comprehensive evaluation, hearing aids may be recommended. Many factors are considered in making a specific recommendation, including the patient’s hearing loss, communication needs, lifestyle and preferences. For most people with hearing loss in both ears, using hearing aids in both ears offers significant advantages, including improvement in speech understanding in both quiet and noisy situations and better ability to localize sound sources. Patients who have “nerve deafness” and high frequency hearing loss can and do benefit from the use of hearing aids in most cases. Over 95% of patients with hearing loss can successfully wear hearing aids.

In the same way that glasses do not “cure” vision deficits, hearing aids do not “cure” hearing loss. However, hearing aids can provide a dramatic difference in both your patient’s life and the lives of their family and significant others.

Hearing and understanding are basic human needs. Hearing problems and the resulting social consequences represent a challenge for society. We believe in a world in which people with restricted hearing can communicate again without limitation thanks to advanced technology.