

THE COST OF
UNTREATED
HEARING LOSS



The Cost of Untreated Hearing Loss

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The Cost of Untreated Hearing Loss

What is Hearing Loss?

Take a moment and close your eyes. What sounds can you hear? Do you hear birds singing out your window, the bustling city streets, your refrigerator humming? The world around us is absolutely overflowing with noises.

Now, take a second to think of the following things: the sound of your dishwasher rumbling through its cycle, the depth of your hallway clock's ticks, the particular gurgle your sink makes as water floods your pipes, the sound of your dearest friend's shuffling feet. When is the last time you heard these things? Can you remember how they sound? Do they sound different than they once did? Seriously consider the quality of these noises. Are they crisp and clear, or do they sound a bit muffled, distant, dulled? Do they fade in and out like someone is adjusting a radio volume?



Self-portrait of Sir Joshua Reynolds—A Deaf Man.

Maybe you have always been that person asking others to repeat things because you didn't quite catch what they said the first time. Sounds just glide over you, and you have to fight to participate in conversations, or fight to distinguish words from all the other noisy interferences. Maybe you've caught yourself responding awkwardly or inappropriately when talking with a group. Or maybe, those closest to you have half-heartedly joked about buying you a pair of hearing aids.

That last possibility can be incredibly off-putting. Regardless of your age, there seems to be a stigma against sticking a foreign object in your body where someone else could possibly glance at it, all because your body doesn't perform up to par according to those around you.

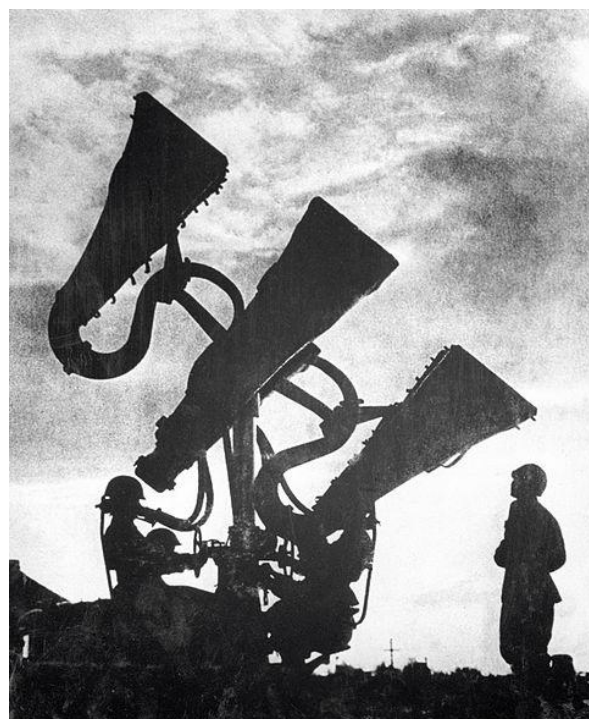
While hearing loss can be frustrating for those of us who suffer from it, it is also a constant in our lives—we live with it from the moment we wake up to the moment we fall

asleep—we adapt. It’s a challenge that can feel extremely isolating, but it is our personal challenge.

The good news: the previous paragraph has many issues that need to be addressed. First and foremost, while hearing difficulties are a very personal thing, you are *not* alone. Not only does hearing loss affect millions of people, but your personal situation is also not a situation that inevitably leads to isolation. The World Health Organization (WHO) reports that at least 360 million people suffer from hearing loss—and that’s just the number of reported cases.¹ Right now, one in six Australians suffer from some form of hearing loss, and that number is only estimated to exponentially increase! By the year 2050, the number of hearing-impaired Australians is expected to be one in four.² Also, there is support for you and your family—this personal battle does not need to be a war fought alone!

Although there are audiologists, otolaryngologists, and audiometrists ready and willing to assess your unique situation and together help you figure out a plan that fits your needs, there are also others who are invested in your quality of life. **Don’t disregard your primary care physician, your family, and your friends!** While you may feel like your hearing is your own issue, it inevitably affects everyone you interact with, and they might very well be just as frustrated as you are. There is truth in the old adage that you know your body best; there is also truth in the statement that those closest to you *might* be able to provide some insight into your hearing situation.

Imagine for a moment that your hearing loss is like a small stone wedged in your shoe. This stone has been there for days on end. You can maybe remember a time when you did not have that slight discomfort, when you would run and jump without thinking twice. Now you can notice if it rubs a blister into your heel. You can also ignore it. Likewise, your daughter or coworker might have picked up on your ever-increasing limp, shuffle-step, or avoidance of joining in the jitterbug dance. Hearing



While this picture, “Defending the Moscow Sky”, depicts a Soviet soldier listening to an acoustic aircraft detector, the image captures what it can feel like to consider hearing aids.

Picture by RIA Novosti archive, image #38689 / Vladimir Granovskiy / CC-BY-SA 3.0

¹ www.who.int.

² www.hearingcrc.org.

loss can be much the same. Don't block out those around you. They may have noticed changes in your behavior as well.

The next section will quickly outline some basics about hearing loss and address some common myths.

Who Suffers from Hearing Loss?

Anyone. Anyone can suffer from hearing loss. While the average age of hearing loss sufferers might be the elderly (in Australia, 65% of people hard of hearing are 70 years old or older), anyone can have difficulty hearing.³ In short, hearing loss is not selective about who it plagues. The young, the old. Healthy people, sick people. Financially stable individuals, financially burdened individuals. In other words, it is not who you are; it is simply a part of your life.

What Causes Hearing Loss?

Any number of things can cause hearing difficulties. We often associate hearing loss with age, and yet, there are many other reasons our sense of hearing can diminish. Genetics, illness, injury, and our *loud* society can all play a role in decreased hearing.⁴ While many of these causes are not things we can control (when's the last time you tried to change your DNA? Was it successful? Let us know if it was!), we can take certain measures to prevent particular injuries and preserve the hearing we have.

Loud noises, high frequency noises, and extremely low frequency noises can all irreparably damage our hearing. Avoiding direct exposure to things like jet-engines, gunfire, construction, and rock concerts can help save your valuable sense of hearing. Wearing earplugs every time you swim and when avoiding intense noises is predictable and unavoidable. Visit your doctor if you are sick—infections, particularly sinus infections and ear infections, can cause hearing damage. Also, if you have a head injury, insist on a hearing assessment right after the initial injury and again a few months later.

You Lose What You Don't Use!

Sensory Deprivation. Now, if that's not an intimidating phrase, then we don't know what is. Basically, sensory deprivation is nature's way of saying to each of us that if we do not take steps to help our body mend, our body will decide we might just not need that sense after all. Just as your muscle definition can deplete if you do not maintain the same

³ www.hearingcrc.org.

⁴ www.betterhearing.org; www.who.int.

exercise regimen, if your hearing loss goes undiagnosed and untreated, you might be unable to regain it or even mitigate the damage.⁵

Does Hearing Loss = Deaf?

No. The severity of hearing loss varies. The basic breakdown of severity is Mild (about 66% of sufferers), Moderate (about 23% of sufferers), and Severe (about 11% of sufferers).⁶ “Deaf” refers to the most profound hearing loss, where the individual hears very little or nothing.⁷

How Long Does it Take on Average to Address Hearing Loss?

It depends. If the onset of your hearing loss is rapid, you may be more inclined to get it checked out sooner. If, on the other hand, you have had long-term hearing problems or your hearing loss has occurred slowly, you may not even be aware of the severity of your condition. The bottom line is, the sooner you get your hearing checked, the sooner you could be hearing more clearly! Regardless of whether you have been putting off a visit to the doctor regarding your hearing for weeks, months, or years, it is always recommended that you make the call—put forth the effort—and do not leave your condition undiagnosed or untreated.

⁵ [Sininger, Doyle, Moore; 1999.](#)

⁶ www.hearingcrc.org.

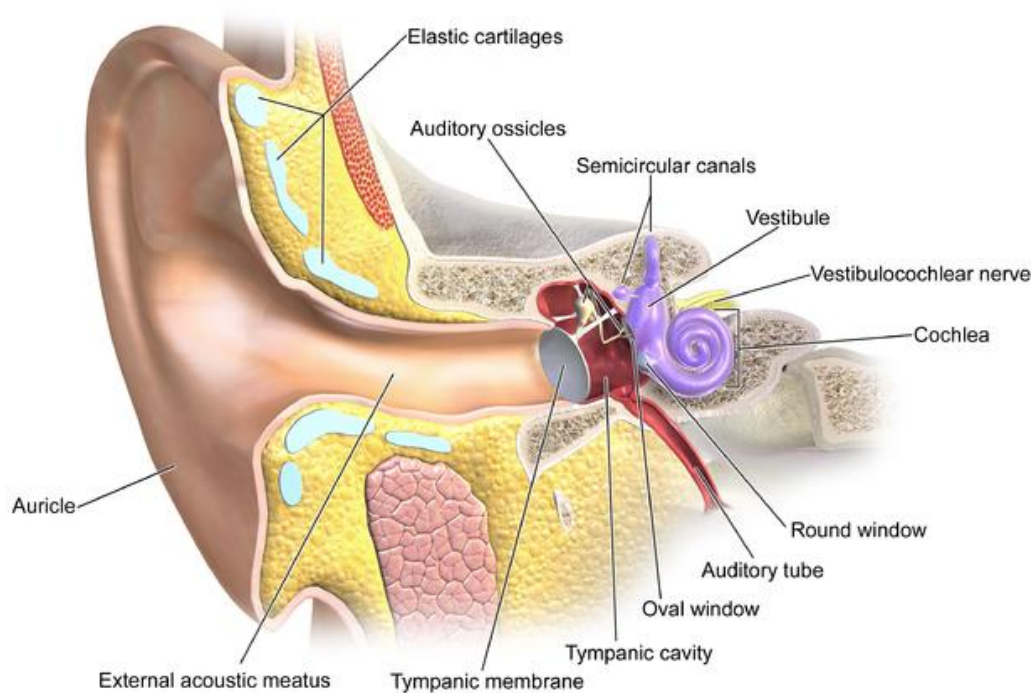
⁷ www.who.int.

At What Cost?

Doctor's visits are expensive. Hearing aids can be expensive. These two facts are frequent deterrents from seeking a hearing loss diagnosis or treatment. When considering seeking medical advice regarding your hearing loss, keep in mind that an unchecked hearing problem costs much more than the doctor's bill or hearing aid price. Let's consider the physical, financial, psychological, and social costs of *not* visiting your doctor before we break down what you can expect to pay the doctor.

Physical Cost: What Happens Physically When Hearing Loss Goes Unchecked?

As we briefly addressed earlier, remaining undiagnosed and untreated can deteriorate your physical existence. It might sound extreme, but let's take a look at how the ear functions and what role our hearing plays in routine activities.



The Anatomy of the Ear.
Picture by Bruce Blaus / CC BY 3.0

Hearing is a complex process. Broken down into three sections, we can more clearly understand what each part of the ear accomplishes and how damage to particular areas can lead to other physical issues.⁸

- 1) Outer Ear: The outer ear is what you can see; it's the half-shell cartilage and skin part and the external ear canal. This part of the hearing system acts as a fleshy amplifier. Have you ever noticed that if you cup your hand behind your ear or are sitting in a corner in which you can hear better? Think of those two activities as an extension of your natural amplifier. While ears may look funky, they are shaped in such a way as to funnel sound into our ear canal.
- 2) Middle Ear: The middle ear begins at the tympanic membrane (more colloquially known as your eardrum). Beyond your eardrum, there are a few teeny tiny bones, two muscles, a few ligaments, nerves, and the beginning of your auditory tube (also known as the Eustachian tube). This section of your hearing system is where much of the magic happens. Your eardrum vibrates because air pressure changes. These fluctuating waves of air pressure are sound waves—what we commonly call noise. As the sound waves bounce off your eardrum, the vibrations continue to the other intricate parts of your middle ear, transforming them into a recognizable sound.
- 3) Inner Ear: The inner ear is composed of your cochlea, a nerve, and your vestibular system. Your cochlea is made up of little canals filled with cochlear fluid. The fluid in these chambers work with tiny hairs to send chemical messages to your nerves, which then send the stimuli of sound to your brain. Amazingly, the unique vibrations are funneled in from the outer ear and bounced off the eardrum, which then turn on an internal switch that sends a particular sound message to your brain. It's as if your outer ear receives an encrypted e-mail and your middle and inner ear work to decrypt the message into something intelligible! The unique vibrations can be interpreted as pitch, loudness, and by comparing the sound from both ears; distance and direction. Your vestibular system works by analyzing head movements into something tangible. Based on the direction and speed of movement, your vestibular system controls your balance, mapping each of your body parts into the physical space around you and updating these "maps" almost instantaneously.

⁸ www.betterhearing.org.

So, now it is easy to see how an infection in your middle ear can cause distorted sounds, how an inner ear infection can make you clumsy, and how any number of minute changes to this system can negatively affect your hearing experience.

Because the hearing system involves so much work and has so many tiny mechanisms, if the body notices that the transmission and interpretation parts are not working effectively, the body begins to ignore the sound wave stimuli and put less emphasis on interpreting sound. So, if you don't use it, you lose it! Think about it this way: if you do not use your leg muscles, they will weaken. If you do not stretch regularly, you will lose flexibility. If you do not exercise your brain, you can lose your cognitive functions. Your sense of hearing is similar. Hearing involves a stimulus, the ears' reception of the stimulus, and then the interpretation of the sound. Each step, even though we don't consciously control it, takes effort and takes a toll on our body.

Here's another way of comprehending it: think back to your elementary school years of science class. We were taught that bats use echolocation and have very weak eyesight. Their eyesight is not weak because they inherently have less-perfected sight processes; their eyesight is weaker because they do not rely on it for survival.

Much the same way, human bodies do not waste precious energy on things we do not rely on. The upside to this story is that your hearing is uniquely precious; just as your calves have muscle memory; your brain retains the knowledge of what each part of the hearing system is supposed to do. If you catch your hearing loss in a reasonable amount of time, you can retrain your brain to rev up your hearing system and keep your sense of sound in check.

But, take one more thing from this—your body is intricately balanced. Each of our senses are most effective when they work together. Without one sense working correctly, the others try to compensate. This leads to two very exasperating side effects: for one, you will be tired. Very tired. Leaving your hearing loss unchecked will require much more energy and strain on your other systems. The increased effort required to listen, interpret, and comprehend every audible interaction is *exhausting*. Secondly, with more energy spent on navigating every day activities that once were instinctive, your other, more complicated, bodily processes may suffer. More recent studies have linked cognitive decline to unchecked hearing loss. Even if you are putting forth effort to exercise your cognitive functions, your usual brain gymnastic sessions may not be enough to maintain your cognitive functions' levels. Hearing loss overloads your other systems. So, don't stop doing your crosswords or Sudoku puzzles if they seem to be getting more difficult; take this as one more sign that your hearing loss is having an impact on your body. Take the next step toward bettering your quality of life. Get your hearing checked.

Another thing to remember is that ringing in the ears, clinically known as tinnitus, is a symptom of hearing loss. Some might just think this is an irritating byproduct of aging; in fact, it can just get worse the longer you wait to deal with it. Getting your hearing problems checked early can help reduce the effects of these issues.

Financial Cost: Lost Opportunities

While the physical cost of untreated hearing loss alone can be daunting, many of us are concerned with the financial side of things. Hearing aids are costly. It's no secret that you can expect to pay from around \$3,000 for a proper pair of hearing aids. But consider now the alternative: you have begun to notice that your loss of hearing is impeding your normal day-to-day interactions. Perhaps you have slept past your alarm clock and were late to work because you could not hear the alarm. Maybe you have been accused of slacking or not paying attention in meetings all because you couldn't hear your co-workers or follow the multi-voiced conversations. Possibly, your capabilities of completing your job have even come under question.

Although workers' compensation can be provided for certain cases of hearing loss, the lost economic profit for the hearing impaired is unprecedented. In considering the unemployed, a disproportionate amount of otherwise job-capable hearing-impaired individuals lack employment. For those employed, a disproportionate number of otherwise job-capable hearing-impaired individuals are working in "lower grade" jobs as compared to the general population. Hearing loss has been shown time and time again to negatively impact job opportunities.⁹

Let's talk scientific reports and numbers for a moment. A 1989 study demonstrated that the amount of money spent on workers' compensation claims for hearing loss for a single year in a single city equaled more than \$5,300,000! That figures to about \$14,000 per claim. Keep in mind that the number of hearing-impaired individuals has increased significantly in the past 25 years and is only estimated to continue to climb. In addition, these figures only account for a very minute percentage of the world's hearing-impaired.¹⁰

A more recent study conducted in 2000 noted that "severe to profound hearing loss is expected to cost [American] society \$297,000 over the lifetime of an [American] individual."¹¹ The majority of these costs are credited to reduced work productivity.

And finally, for the approximately 3.55 million Australians with hearing loss, the socioeconomic cost was shown to be just under \$600 for every Australian. In other words,

⁹ www.who.int.

¹⁰ [Alleyne, Dufresne, Kanji, Reesal; 1989.](#)

¹¹ [Mohr, Feldman, Dunbar, McConkey-Robbins, Niparko, Rittenhouse, Skinner; 2000.](#)

your unchecked hearing impairment could be costing everyone you know, everyone you interact with, everyone you pass on the street, almost \$600 per year.¹²

Now imagine for a moment that your hearing loss does not immediately mean any lost time at work, any workers' compensation claims, or the looming threat of losing your job.

Not all hearing impairments can be "fixed," but the vast majority of hearing loss can be improved through treatment (either medical intervention or hearing aids). While it is estimated that about 10% of the world's hearing impaired have access to and use hearing aids,¹³ you do not need to be among the 90% that go unaided (pun intended). Think about having a conversation with your doctor about your hearing loss as an investment in your future, your children's future, and the future of your community at large.

Psychological Cost: The Personal Impact

Read the following situation and think about how it makes you feel.

One of your friends has decided to come and visit you. You haven't seen each other in years, but you have always been able to pick up right where you left off last time you were together. Your visits are always filled with quick-paced conversations, trying to catch up for lost time. Your visits also usually involve going out to eat or going to the movies. These times together are something you look forward to and enjoy immensely.

But lately, your hearing has started to fade. You have tried ignoring the buzzing in your ears and the drop of sound. You do not like to talk about it, and you think you can "get by" without addressing the issue... except it has made the activities you and your friend usually do less than enjoyable. Lately you've been avoiding places like the shopping centre or the movies. You dislike going to restaurants because you do not know where they will seat you and if you will be able to hear. And everyone around you has developed the annoying habit of talking too fast or mumbling (surely it's their speech patterns that have changed, not your hearing!).

As you wait at the airport baggage claim, you think about how this trip will play out.

What are you feeling? Are you overwhelmed by a flood of anxiety just thinking about how your friend will act toward you? Does it make you sad to think about how things might not be the same? Do you feel alone? Are you angry with your friend for always wanting to do things in such noisy spaces?

¹² www.hearingcrc.org.

¹³ www.who.int

It's ok. Seriously. All of these reactions are normal. While it is clear that they may not be the optimal response to your friend's visit, your feelings are legitimate. Emotions of anxiety, depression, isolation, anger, and frustration are all very common for those of us with hearing impairments.¹⁴ Our world, once full of all kinds of sound has now left us in a dull place. The crispness of crumbling autumn leaves has long gone. The clicking of puppy toenails on tile has stopped resonating. Sounds we once took for granted have abandoned us. And sounds we have relied on have become muffled—leaving us in a world of miscommunication, misunderstanding, and frustration.



Hearing loss can make you feel like you are alone in a very stark place, completely absent of the beauty the world used to offer. If you are feeling depressed, please get help.

Picture by Sander Van der Wel / CC BY-SA 2.0

Even though these feelings are okay to have, you should not ignore them. You do not need to succumb to this psychological wasteland. Just like how ringing in your ears can be an indicator of your hearing loss, your emotions can be an indicator of the negative personal effects caused by hearing loss. Remember that your mental health is just as important as your physical health. Negative moods that become your new normal should not be ignored. Even if your emotional health is the only obvious factor that has changed

¹⁴ www.hearingcrc.org.

since your hearing loss, that alone is enough justification to go see your doctor and talk about your options. Do not belittle this aspect of your quality of life.

Psychological Costs: The Relational Aspects of Hearing Loss

In addition to your own mental health, your hearing loss affects those around you. Because hearing is so essential in human communication, being stripped of this sense can debilitate your relationships. Think about how many people you interact with on a daily basis. How many of those interactions require talking? How many of those interactions require you to listen and respond? From the busy barista at the bustling corner café who takes your morning coffee order to the man asking you to hold the elevator on the way up the office building, we rely on quick, efficient communication to get through our daily lives.

Maybe you have found yourself not talking with your spouse, parents, or children as frequently because keeping up the conversation is just too strenuous. It may have started as dropping filler-phrases or greetings. You may now find yourself sitting at dinner with your family in almost complete silence. The level of communication between you and your loved ones is a habit, and the more infrequently you talk to each other, the more distant you become. But your relationships do not have to suffer just because you have a hard time hearing! Yes, you may have to work harder; you may have to talk to your loved ones about your hearing difficulties; you may have to make a conscious effort to have meaningful conversations in a place that isn't so noisy (the living room with the TV off, not at the mall's food court, perhaps). But these obstacles can be overcome.

The most important thing to keep in mind and make sure those around you understand, is that **hearing loss often results in miscommunication or misunderstanding**.¹⁵

If everyone is aware that what they say or don't say can be misconstrued, everyone can work a little harder to avoid such issues or address them if they arise. I'll use a story from a hearing-impaired reader as an example:

I have always been hard of hearing, but after getting mono in college and being diagnosed with autoimmune disorders, my hearing seems to just keep getting worse. I have hearing aids, but they are uncomfortable and the batteries keep dying. I know I should get a new pair, but I keep putting it off. Although my mother is aware of this, it is still a struggle sometimes and we

¹⁵ www.hearingcrc.org.

often get our feelings hurt because someone (me) thinks someone else (my mother) said something she in actuality didn't say or mean. It usually goes something like this: we are sitting down to dinner and everyone is talking at once. I hear my name and look to see who is trying to talk to me. By the time I figure out that it is my mother, she is already halfway through her side of the conversation. Her facial expressions do not match what I think she said moments before, so my reactions are inappropriate. She may have said something like, "It's such a beautiful day and you look so lovely in that salmon colored shirt and doesn't your hair just absolutely clash with the color of Jimmy's shirt? I love how the pink looks against your skin, but yellow isn't your color." By the time I look at my mother, her facial expressions match the last part what she said and I, not having heard everything before "but yellow isn't your color" assume that the whole conversation is a tirade against my poor fashion choices. I'm visibly upset and say something about her hurting my feelings. She reacts against what I just said because my reaction seems totally uncalled for and out of place. So, all of a sudden, our dinner table looks something like this picture of fighting hippos surrounded by the rest of the family just kind of slinking below the surface, entranced by our stupidity, but not wanting to get involved.

As you can see, this reader and her mother have a strained relationship all because of basic miscommunication. Even though both parties are aware that one of them is hard of hearing, it takes considerable effort on the part of both of them to make sure they are understood.



Picture by Nilsrinaldi / CC BY-SA 2.0

Dollars and Cents: What to Expect

While your General Practitioner (GP) is good at diagnosing a lot of physical ailments like a broken bone or flu, a specialist is needed to identify hearing loss. Many clinics around the country perform hearing examinations that are both fast (10-15 minutes) and very often free of charge. This baseline test will establish whether you need to be referred to another practitioner and whether comprehensive testing is required.

So, how much does it cost to get your hearing checked and to take the necessary steps? Since the first step is talking with your doctor, you can figure that visit to be the out-of-pocket cost of a typical doctor's visit. Your GP can probably complete a preliminary hearing assessment, determining what type of hearing loss you are experiencing. S/he will look in your ears, feel your lymph nodes, and ask you relevant questions about when you noticed your hearing declining, when it's most cumbersome to you, and if anyone around you has noticed or mentioned anything about changes in your behavior that could be attributed to hearing loss. Some GPs even have basic screening devices that can report more specific information about your hearing abilities.

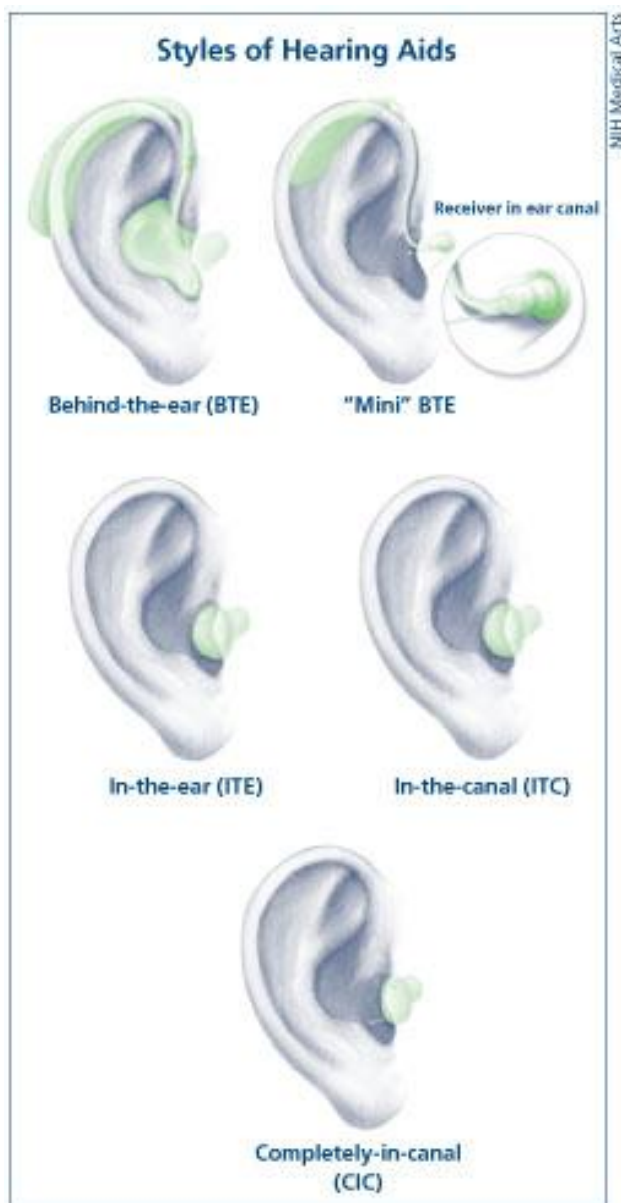
From here, your GP may refer you to a reputable audiologist, audiometrist, or otolaryngologist (also known as an ENT: Ear, Nose, and Throat doctor). There, your hearing will further be assessed. This doesn't hurt and usually reenacts the hearing tests you might have experienced in grade school, where you wore headphones while the nurse pressed a button to emit a series of beeps (and you hoped that your hearing was in fact so fine-tuned that the government would declare you to be a superhero).

You will go into a small, quiet room and listen through some headphones—this tracks what frequencies you can or cannot hear. You may also be asked to repeat words or phrases —this helps your hearing specialist determine how clear your hearing is (just because you can hear that there's a noise doesn't mean you can distinguish what it is!). As with your typical doctor's visit, a visit to a specialist will vary in cost depending on your financial and health insurance situation.

If your hearing specialist decides that hearing instruments will help improve your hearing (and in turn, your quality of life!), take time to understand how wonderful these little devices are. It can seem daunting to consider, but your quality of life is worth it! Just like all the technology in our world, hearing aid technology has advanced incredibly within the last few years. Not only has the design and fit of most hearing aids been improved, but so has the technology behind it. Finally, most hearing aids no longer have the problems with dust, sweat, and water that older hearing aids were plagued by. They have the greatly improved ability to help you hear speech in noise, and the whistling byproduct from hearing aids is pretty much a thing of the past. Once bulky, uncomfortable, and overall

finicky pieces of equipment, the hearing aids of today come in so many styles you are sure to find one that meets all your needs.¹⁶

Additionally, there are so many styles available today that were unimaginable just a decade ago. From traditional Behind-the-Ear hearing aids to Completely-in-the-Canal aids, the common styles and visibility of hearing aids are sleek and practically unnoticeable.



¹⁶ www.betterhearing.org.

Balance the financial cost with the inevitable gains. The cost of getting your hearing checked and taking the necessary steps to improve your quality of life far outweighs the costs listed in the previous sections.¹⁷ Find more information regarding how to manage the pitfalls of finding affordable hearing aid assistance in this eBook, *Hearing Aid Buyers Guide for the Self-Funded Australian*.¹⁸

¹⁷ www.starkey.com.

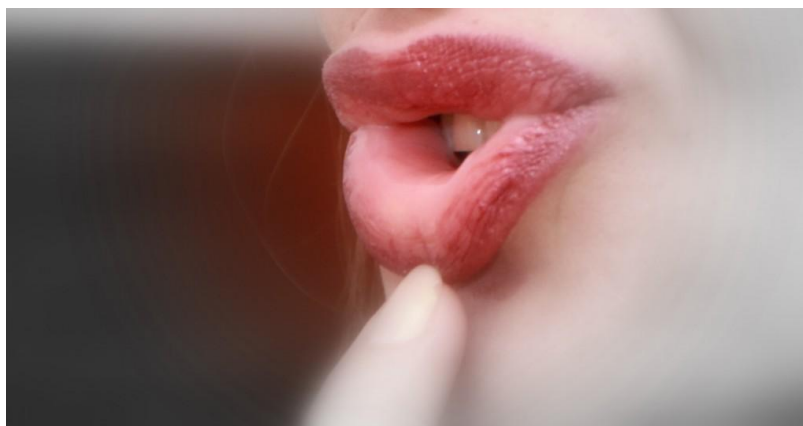
¹⁸ <http://hearingaidbuyersguide.com.au/ebook4/>

For Those Closest to You: A Letter to Significant Others, Parents, and Children

Dear _____:

There are many things I want to tell you about what I have been going through lately. I am sorry if I seem distant or easily irritated. I have noticed lately that it has become difficult to hear. It's not always noticeable, and it's not always cumbersome. But sometimes, it leaves me feeling completely alone. I can't keep up with conversations the way I am used to. When it's more than just you or me talking, I struggle to hear what everyone is saying. When we are trying to talk and there are any sorts of background noises, I have a hard time distinguishing your words from the other sounds. Sometimes, it seems like I am ignoring you, but I'm not; I honestly didn't hear you.

I don't want to be coddled or treated like I have a handicap. I don't need you to yell everything you say or repeat everything anyone else says. I would appreciate a few things though, and I think that together these are things we can both do that will help me understand you better.



- Look at me when we are talking. It's easier for me to hear you when I can see your facial expressions and read your lips. You don't have to over-exaggerate every emotion, but being able to see your natural reactions to what you are saying helps me distinguish sounds and hear you.
- Ask if I would like you to be at my doctor's appointments. I don't want you to talk over me if you come, but sometimes it's hard to hear the doctor. I want to be involved in the visits, but a second set of ears is always appreciated! You can also help me by mentioning to the doctor things that you have noticed changing that maybe I haven't noticed.

- Don't talk with food in your mouth or covering your mouth. I already have trouble making out words; it's more difficult to do this when your voice is obscured or muffled by muffins.
- Even if I can't keep up with the conversation when more people are talking, please don't ignore me. Actions like this make me feel even more left out than I feel on my own. I still want to be included.
- Ask if I need help or if there is anything you can do. More than anything, I need you to be my friend. I need you to understand that this is a difficult time for me and many things I used to take for granted—and things you still do take for granted—have disappeared from my life. I may not enjoy the movies like I once did, or want to go to church. These places are often loud, but the sounds seem jumbled to me.

Above all, I want you to know how thankful I am that you have taken the time to listen to me. Feel free to ask me questions about my unique hearing issues. I know that my hearing loss has also taken its toll on you and that it can be strenuous to try and interact with me. Here are a few website links that I have found to be helpful:

<http://www.hearinghq.com.au/>,

<http://speech-language-pathology-audiology.advanceweb.com/>,

Phonak.com.au,

and <http://www.asha.org/public/>.

Thank you for helping me help myself!

All the best,

Me ☺

Practical Steps to Improve Your Quality of Life

- 1) Screening: Talk to your primary care physician about your hearing loss concerns. You can also get an idea of how hearing screenings work and at what frequencies you have difficulty by taking an online hearing test. Alternatively many hearing clinics offer free hearing screening. Below are a few reputable online screening tools:

www.betterhearing.org

http://www.phonak.com/au/b2c/en/hearing/recognizing_hearingloss/hearingtest.html

- 2) Full Assessment: If you are referred for further testing after a screening, schedule a visit to a hearing specialist. While a referral is always necessary when seeing an otolaryngologist (ENT), you can make an appointment for a comprehensive hearing assessment with an audiologist or audiometrist without a referral. Use Google to find your nearest audiologist:

Search for: Audiologist (and your city name)

- 3) Try Hearing Aids: Listen to the advice your hearing specialist gives you and don't become discouraged. Even if you agree to try hearing aids and are disappointed with the initial results, talk to your hearing care professional. They are there to help you. And remember: your brain needs time to "train" and get used to hearing again. Just like how braces have to be adjusted and you have to reposition the seat and mirrors in a new car over the course of the first few months, hearing aids are so customizable that you and your hearing care professional may have to make adjustments before you are completely satisfied. Take the first steps and you'll quickly be on your way to a more vibrant, sound-filled life! Below is a hearing aid buyers guide, which is a wonderful resource for you and your family.

<http://hearingaidbuyersguide.com.au/ebook4/>

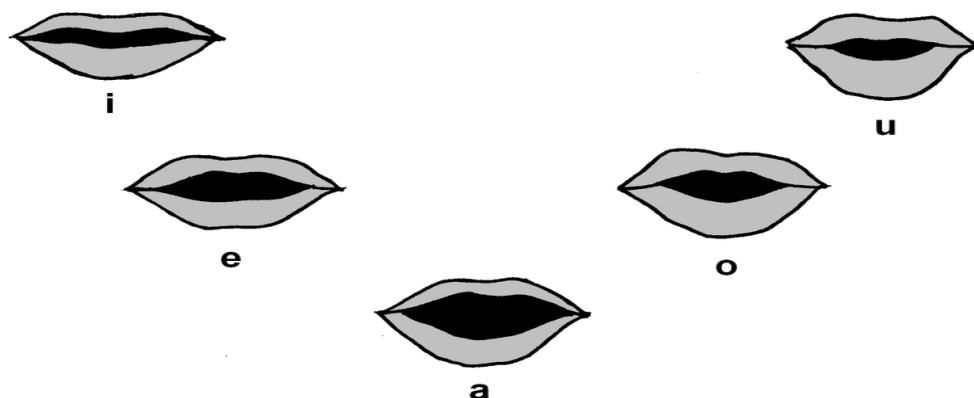
- 4) Mention That You Are Hard of Hearing: Unlike other disabilities, being hard of hearing is not immediately noticeable. Maybe people honestly do not recognize that you are having trouble hearing them. One quick way to avoid unnecessary frustrations is to let those around you know that you have a hard time hearing. Do not be ashamed or abrasive, just mention it. You have nothing to be embarrassed of. Do recognize though that the way people react toward you may not be out of rudeness; most people are more than willing to speak more clearly, speak a little

louder, or assist you in other ways (captions at church services, CC screenings of movies, audio enhancers at tourist attractions)—you just have to speak up.

5) Face Those Who Are Speaking To You and Let Them Know How Looking at Them

Helps: Just like how other people talking with their mouths full or with something obscuring their lips makes it difficult to understand, it only does so much good if you are not looking at them. Conquering your hearing difficulties relies so heavily on communication. If you speak openly with the people around you and you both make a conscious decision to minimize the things that can make communication more difficult, you will well be on your way to having a better relationship.

Also, even if you do not know how to read lips, you will be astonished by how much your eyesight helps with your hearing. You may not realize how much you rely on your eyes to help you hear, but we have all been unconsciously training ourselves to put sound and lip shape together. Our lips (and the rest of our mouths—teeth, tongue, and throat rigidity) form specific shapes to produce specific sounds. Look at the diagram below to see just how much our mouth changes while producing different vowels.



6) Decrease Background Noise: While it may be obvious that standing on the sidewalk next to a jackhammer might hinder your hearing, consider the other common things that make it difficult for you to hear.



Jackhammers are not only noisy pieces of equipment; they can also be extremely detrimental to your hearing. Notice how this construction worker is wearing ear protection to minimize the effects of his machinery.



Obviously attending an airshow such as the one pictured here is not the ideal location for having a conversation. Don't make it more difficult on yourself.

On a serious note, decrease background noise. Turn off the TV. Turn down the music, or better yet, turn it off. If your husband doing dishes and trying to talk at the same time is too distracting, tell him. If your boss is multitasking while talking to you (tapping her foot, typing an email, or has her phone on speaker phone while on hold), mention that it is hard for you to focus on what she is trying to say when there is so much audio interference.

What Is It Like For Your Caretaker?

Not only is hearing loss hard for you, but it is also hard for your family and friends. Providing them a letter gives them good information and a fine place to start; putting those practices into action can be harder. Anyone with a disability can feel guilty for being a supposed burden on family members, and conversely, that caregiver can feel overwhelmed by the expectation that he or she should know exactly what to do.¹⁹

Many (and honestly, most) family members are ill equipped to handle these problems on their own. This goes for any sort of health problem, from the deaf to the elderly—people just don't know what to do. A family caregiver suddenly faces a host of new responsibilities, which can leave him or her feeling swamped, isolated, and helpless. However, there are many resources available that can help a new family caregiver find their footing.

Here are some tips for a new caregiver:

1. Seek out educational materials regarding your family member's disability or illness. You don't know what you don't know, so learn as much as possible.
2. Find a support network with caregivers in similar positions. Getting advice from someone living through the same adversity can help you.
3. Don't baby the person with the disability. Nobody likes losing their independence, and just because they have a new problem to deal with does not mean they've regressed in any way.
4. Take breaks when you need to. There is nothing wrong with having limits.

The thing that people don't like to talk about is that caregivers will feel anything from guilt to anger to resentment. This shouldn't be kept inside, and it should be acknowledged. Just because a family member is having problems does not negate that the caregiver will also have problems. There will be anger, anxiety, and a sense of grief. Hearing problems will change the family dynamic. Things will no longer be the same, and that should not be ignored.

Caregivers can turn to family members or friends, places of worship, support groups, therapists, and more. There is an entire network of support if they know where to go. Caregivers shouldn't try to be Superman. They will need help. Furthermore, they should not forget that they themselves have needs and wants that cannot be overshadowed and forgotten. A caregiver cannot give care if they are not cared for as well.

¹⁹ <http://www.helpguide.org/>.

Final Advice: What Happens if I Don't...?

Although we have touched on the costs associated with untreated/undiagnosed hearing loss, there are countless articles that discuss these concerns in more detail. Here are a few recommended links that can help you further your understanding.

www.hearingservices.gov.au: The Office of Hearing Services in Australia is dedicated to managing the issuance of vouchers to eligible persons in order to acquire a variety of hearing services, such as hearing assessments, free-to-client hearing devices, advice regarding maximum device benefits, continued support, and repairs. Elderly Australians, those under 26 years of age, veterans, and those in the Australian Defence Force are among the individuals whom this program serves.

<http://www.safeworkaustralia.gov.au/>: Safe Work Australia is an independent body established by the Safe Work Australia Act 2008. It leads the creation and development of policies that seek to improve work health and safety. It provides model codes of practice, prepares material relating to occupational health and safety, analyses data, and monitors the adoption of their policies.

www.betterhearingaustralia.org.au/: This national organisation for Australian hearing-impaired people exists to enhance well-being and life solutions by promotion education, advocacy, and support. As the largest consumer-based non-profit for hearing loss, it provides advice, education, management, and support. This equips a hearing-impaired person with the resources necessary to live a successful life.

<http://www.hearnet.org.au/>: The Hearing Education and Research Network (HEARnet) is a not-for-profit designed by health professionals and researchers in order to provide innovative hearing technology updates and knowledge regarding how to protect your hearing. Not only does it offer accredited online training for health professionals seeking new skills, but it also has a large digital publication collection containing journals, reports, and technical data.

www.betterhearing.org: This is the research and educational arm of the Hearing Industries Association, located in the United States. The Better Hearing Institute seeks to engage the public in hearing health education and making sure that materials are available for those suffering from hearing loss so they can find proper treatment. Since hearing plays such an important part in an individual's "whole health, productivity, and quality of life," the BHI wants to create an environment of "hearing wellness."

<http://www.valuehearing.com.au/Blog/>: This blog offers an approachable way to keep up on information regarding hearing loss, tinnitus, and all the latest about new and innovative hearing technology.

Finally, one last risk we have not gone into depth on: hearing impairment increases the risk of accidents—not just around the house, but also behind the wheel. This particular article outlines exactly what types of dangers you put yourself in by not getting your hearing treated: phb.secondsensehearing.com.

Please seriously consider getting your hearing loss diagnosed and treated. Think of it as an insurance policy you take out on yourself for your safety and the safety of those around you—not to mention the increased quality of life you can expect to experience!

Hearing loss does not equal “old fogey.” If anything, it is a sign to slow down for a few moments and to take care of yourself. By seeking the advice of medical professionals, using medical devices, and admitting that hearing loss doesn’t mean you’re old and out of touch, you can still maintain a fantastic quality of life – and hear everything along the way.



Is it worth the risk of putting yourself and those around you in danger by not treating your hearing loss?

Picture by DaimlerChrysler AG / CC BY 3.0

Check List: Signs of Hearing Loss

Below are some of the more common indicators of hearing loss. Check the items that are relevant to you and share this sheet with your primary care physician. (Indicators taken from www.betterhearing.org and www.who.int).

- ☐ I require frequent repetition.
- ☐ I have difficulty following conversations involving two or more people.
- ☐ I think that other people are mumbling or sound muffled.
- ☐ I have difficulty hearing in noisy situations.
- ☐ I especially have trouble hearing children and women.
- ☐ I keep the TV and radio louder than others.
- ☐ I have to adjust the TV or radio volume higher after someone else listens.
- ☐ I often answer or respond inappropriately in conversations.
- ☐ I hear a whooshing or ringing in my ear(s) (tinnitus).
- ☐ I have noticed a drop in my hearing.
- ☐ I read lips or have to watch people's faces when they speak.
- ☐ I have noticed myself turning a particular ear towards people who are talking.
- ☐ I feel stressed from straining to hear what others are saying.
- ☐ I feel annoyed at others because I can't hear/understand them.
- ☐ I feel embarrassed to meet new people because I might not be able to understand them.
- ☐ I feel embarrassed because I often misunderstand people.
- ☐ I feel nervous trying to hear and understand.
- ☐ I withdraw from social situations that I once enjoyed because I have trouble hearing.
- ☐ I have a family history of hearing loss.

- ☐ I have taken/am taking medications that can harm my hearing (“ototoxic drugs”, such as antibiotics, chemotherapy, and radiation).
- ☐ I have had an illness that is known to be harmful to hearing (such as meningitis, chronic ear infections, maternal rubella, syphilis, measles, or mumps).
- ☐ I have worked with noisy machinery.
- ☐ I have been exposed to loud music.
- ☐ I have been exposed to other loud noises (such as gunfire, explosions, jet-engines, sirens...).
- ☐ I have suffered a head injury.
- ☐ I have drainage in one or both of my ears.
- ☐ I have diabetes.
- ☐ I have heart problems.
- ☐ I have thyroid problems.
- ☐ I have circulation problems.
- ☐ My friends or family have recommended I look into hearing aids.

Quiz: Is My Hearing Loss Affecting My Quality of Life?

The following quiz can be used to assess the cost of your untreated hearing loss. Use this as a guide to recognize how your hearing loss affects your life and those around you. You can also take this into your next medical appointment and discuss it with your doctor. (Questions have been developed from information taken from www.betterhearing.org and www.who.int).

- 1) When in a quiet room talking with one person, I
 - ☐ frequently ask for them to repeat what they have said.
 - ☐ sometimes ask for them to repeat what they have said.
 - ☐ rarely ask for them to repeat what they have said.
- 2) When in a quiet room talking with two or more people, I
 - ☐ frequently ask for them to repeat what they have said.
 - ☐ sometimes ask for them to repeat what they have said.
 - ☐ rarely ask for them to repeat what they have said.
- 3) When I'm talking with one person in a moderately loud area (room with TV on, at the mall, at church, in an office, outside), I
 - ☐ frequently ask for them to repeat what they have said.
 - ☐ sometimes ask for them to repeat what they have said.
 - ☐ rarely ask for them to repeat what they have said.
- 4) When I'm talking with two or more people in a moderately loud area, I
 - ☐ frequently ask for them to repeat what they have said.
 - ☐ sometimes ask for them to repeat what they have said.
 - ☐ rarely ask for them to repeat what they have said.
- 5) When I'm talking with one person in a loud area (sporting event, movie theater, concert), I
 - ☐ frequently ask for them to repeat what they have said.
 - ☐ sometimes ask for them to repeat what they have said.
 - ☐ rarely ask for them to repeat what they have said.
- 6) When I'm talking with two or more people in a loud area, I
 - ☐ frequently ask for them to repeat what they have said.
 - ☐ sometimes ask for them to repeat what they have said.
 - ☐ rarely ask for them to repeat what they have said.

- 7) I avoid conversations with two or more people
___ when there is background noise of any sort (music, TV, other conversations going on).
___ when I catch myself fighting to understand and keep up with the conversation.
___ when I can't distinguish the words people are saying because there's other noise.
___ never.
- 8) I have misunderstood what someone has said because I couldn't hear them clearly
___ once or twice.
___ once or twice this week.
___ once or twice today.
- 9) I have responded to a question or piped in inappropriately during a conversation because I couldn't hear clearly
___ once or twice.
___ once or twice this week.
___ once or twice today.
- 10) I have noticed that my balance has gotten worse.
___ True.
___ False.
- 11) I have noticed that I am clumsier than I once was.
___ True.
___ False.
- 12) When riding in a car and there is an emergency vehicle with its siren running, I
___ hear the siren before I see the vehicle.
___ hear the siren after I see the vehicle.
___ hear the siren and know what direction it is coming from before I see the vehicle.
___ hear the siren as it's quickly approaching me (a few car lengths back).
___ couldn't tell you the last time I've heard a siren.
- 13) I have gotten into an accident that could have been avoided if I had been able to hear.
___ True.
___ False.

14) I avoid going to the movies because it's too loud, but I can't hear the dialogue.

☐ True.

☐ False.

15) I feel alone.

☐ True.

☐ False.

16) I get frustrated because people don't speak clearly.

☐ True.

☐ False.

17) I am exhausted after having a conversation with two or more people.

☐ True.

☐ False.

18) I feel irritable when having a conversation with two or more people.

☐ True.

☐ False.

19) People I know seem to talk over me.

☐ True.

☐ False.

20) Those around me seem to have super-sonic hearing.

☐ True.

☐ False.