

Age-related Hearing Loss Factsheet

Age-related hearing loss

Age-related hearing loss in the UK and in the rest of the western world is on the rise due to an increasing ageing population. It is a natural process that the vast majority of us will experience to some degree as we age, alongside other sensory deterioration, e.g. in vision.

Age-related hearing loss is estimated to affect the quality of life of over 6 million individuals in the UK. If left unmanaged, hearing loss can lead to feelings of social exclusion, depression, anxiety and other well-documented psychological issues. Interaction with others can often become more difficult and may be tempting to avoid. If you care for an elderly person, be it in a professional capacity or otherwise, it is important to address the issue of hearing loss in order to maintain a high quality of life.

Age related hearing loss is a result of natural deterioration within the hearing system and can be experienced from the age of 40, although it is more common in the over 65s. Advances in medicine, together with the high level of care that many older people receive, are responsible for more people living longer, therefore age-related hearing loss is affecting more people than ever before.

It is worth noting that the degree of hearing loss will vary from one person to the next, and likewise for its impact on a particular person.

For some it will be seen as a life changing condition, for others a mere inconvenience. Most age-related hearing losses are categorised as mild or moderate degrees of hearing loss (measured in decibels against 'normal level of hearing'). Typically, both ears are affected with a similar degree of hearing loss.

The deterioration in hearing usually happens gradually over a number of years, making it tricky to notice right away – many people choose to 'live with it' and ignore the signs of the increasing problems in their hearing.

Symptoms of Age-Related Hearing Loss

Common signs of age-related hearing loss include struggling to hear within background noise; inability to hear, or confusion over high-pitched speech sounds such as “s” and “th”; feeling tired after conversations; feeling that most people simply mumble; having to have the television turned up far higher than others in the same room. Individuals with age related hearing loss usually show more difficulties hearing high-pitched sounds, than low-pitched sounds.

Course of Action

The first step in addressing hearing loss is to investigate the cause or causes and measure any resultant hearing loss. In the first instance a basic hearing check can be done at the GP or taking a hearing test online. A diagnostic hearing test will show the extent of any present hearing loss, in each ear. Hearing tests are available through the NHS, via a referral from your GP, or by attending a local hearing centre directly.

Age related hearing loss can't be cured, but rather managed so its effects on daily lives are minimised as much as possible. A number of amplified devices can offer help. Hearing aids are available privately or via the NHS at no cost (waiting list may apply and models are limited). Modern hearing aids are digital devices that work to amplify incoming sounds in a way that matches where the person has the most difficulties. Additional devices such as extra loud phones and mobiles, loop systems, TV listeners and other alerting devices are also available.

The UK is thought to have over 9 million people who are hard of hearing - based on a 2005 survey by Action On Hearing Loss (at that time known as the RNID). Over 6 million of the total hard of hearing population are over 65 years old.

Article by:

Joan McKechnie, BSc Hons Audiology & Speech Pathology.

Joan works for Hearing Direct.