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A primer on hearing loss

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As audiologists who have treated thousands of patients over the last 25 years, we have learned that hearing loss doesn't just affect your ability to hear; it affects your quality of life.

A common misconception is that hearing loss only occurs as we age. In fact, hearing loss has many different causes, including noise exposure, and it is more common now than ever before. Today's baby boomers are more likely to have a hearing loss than their parents were at the same age. Here are some interesting facts:

- More than 31.5 million Americans have some degree of hearing loss. That's about one in 10 individuals. It is estimated that this may increase to 44 million by 2030.
- Among Americans ages 46 to 64, about 15 percent already have hearing loss, according to a survey by the Better Hearing Institute.
- Two of three people with hearing loss are below retirement age.
- Sixty percent of people with hearing loss are male.
- Only one in five people who could benefit from amplification currently wear hearing aids.

It isn't just your ears

We know from working with our patients that many people procrastinate about having their hearing tested and about the decision to purchase hearing aids once they are diagnosed with hearing loss. We understand their reluctance, but we always try to educate our patients regarding the negative effects that untreated hearing loss can have on an individual's life so they can avoid experiencing these unfortunate outcomes.

• Hearing loss is associated with short-term memory loss. According to a recent study at Brandeis University, older adults with mild to moderate

persons of the same age who had good hearing.

- Hearing loss leads to stress and fatigue because it requires so much effort to listen to what someone is saying—particularly in a noisy environment.

- The National Council on Aging (NCOA) reported that hearing loss can have a significant negative effect on quality of life. In NCOA's survey of 2,300 hearing-impaired adults 50 or older, those with untreated hearing loss were more likely to report depression, anxiety, and paranoia and less likely to participate in organized activities, compared to those who wore hearing aids.

Maintaining our hearing is as important as other aspects of healthful living, even though many of us don't recognize that fact until it is too late. Environmental noise and noise encountered in our recreational pursuits are often detrimental to our hearing.

Loudness is measured in units called decibels (dB). Normal conversation measures about 60 dB. Sounds above 75 dB can cause hearing loss by damaging the hair cells in the inner ear. These hair cells help sound waves reach the brain, where they are interpreted as sound. When the cells are damaged, optimum hearing ability is compromised.

Take two simple steps

If you will routinely take two simple precautions, you'll help to minimize the effect of noise on your hearing. First, wear custom hearing protection when mowing, hunting, attending concerts and the speedway or in any other noisy setting. A variety of filters are available in custom hearing protection so that you can still hear conversation but are protected against the most damaging noise levels.

Second, turn down the volume of everything! Have you ever turned up the volume on the TV

form habits that will help maintain your ability to hear. Start working on it today!

Getting a clue

It may be difficult for you to tell that you are losing your hearing. Frequently our patients tell us that their spouse or significant other is the first to notice their hearing loss. If someone is always telling you to turn the television down, or you think everyone is mumbling, you should have your hearing evaluated. Other signs that you might have a hearing loss:

- Ringing or other noises in your ears.
- Hearing better with one ear than the other.
- Difficulty following conversations in places such as a noisy restaurant or crowded room.
- Difficulty understanding the television, radio, or speakers at public meetings or religious services.

If you experience any of these symptoms, schedule a diagnostic hearing evaluation. To learn more about hearing loss, there are many Web sites with abundant information, including:

National Institutes of Health (NIH)

<http://nihseniorhealth.gov/hearingloss/toc.html>

American Speech Language Hearing Association

<http://www.asha.org/public/hearing/disorders/types.htm>

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)

<http://www.cde.gov/nebddd/dd/dahi.htm>

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