Cochlear implants: Not just for kids

When people think about treating hearing loss, hearing aids are often the first solution that comes to mind. While hearing aids can be highly effective for many people, they are not the only option available.

According to Dr. Emily Cooper, a clinical audiologist and audiology supervisor with OSF HealthCare Illinois Neurological Institute, the best treatment depends on the severity and type of hearing loss. An audiogram, or hearing test, can help audiologists determine the most appropriate option for each patient.

As hearing loss progresses, hearing aids may no longer provide enough benefit, especially when it comes to understanding speech.

When hearing loss becomes more severe, patients may still hear sounds but struggle to clearly understand conversations, even while wearing hearing aids.

"That's when we would consider someone for a cochlear implant," she adds.

Not just for children

Many people associate cochlear implants with children who are born with hearing loss. While cochlear implants can be life-changing for children, Dr. Cooper says adults should not overlook them as a treatment option.

"From nine months, all the way to 95. As long as you're healthy enough to undergo an outpatient surgery, you can get a cochlear implant," Dr. Cooper says.

Despite their effectiveness, cochlear implants remain underused.

"They're completely underutilized," Dr. Cooper stresses. "Only 6-13% of people who could benefit from a cochlear implant actually have one."

For adults experiencing hearing difficulties, the first step is making sure their current hearing aids are working as intended. Dr. Cooper recommends having hearing aids professionally evaluated and adjusted if necessary.

If hearing challenges persist, patients should schedule an appointment with an audiologist to discuss their concerns and determine whether a cochlear implant evaluation may be appropriate.

Who qualifies for a cochlear implant?

Many people are surprised to learn they may qualify for a cochlear implant sooner than they think.

According to Dr. Cooper, candidates may include individuals who:

- Have hearing levels of 60 decibels or poorer
- Score 60% or lower on word understanding testing

A comprehensive hearing evaluation can help determine whether a patient meets candidacy requirements and whether a cochlear implant could improve communication and quality of life.

What happens after implantation?

A cochlear implant works differently than a hearing aid. Rather than simply making sounds louder, the implant bypasses damaged parts of the inner ear and directly stimulates the hearing nerve.

After surgery, the device is activated and adjusted by an audiologist.

Dr. Cooper says patients should expect an adjustment period when the device is first turned on.

"Part of the process is doing listening therapy," Dr. Cooper says. "Over the first 1-3 months, people start to really notice their hearing a lot more than they used to, and understanding a lot more than they used to. So, it can be a slower process over the first couple of months as the brain relearns to hear with this implant."

Initially, sounds may seem robotic or static-like. Over time, however, the brain adapts to the new signals and learns to interpret them more naturally.

Hearing loss can affect anyone

Hearing loss is often associated with aging, but it can affect people at every stage of life.

"Hearing loss does not discriminate," Dr. Cooper says. It can impact infants, children, adults and older adults alike.

Some individuals are born with hearing loss, while others develop it later due to genetics, illness, injury or long-term noise exposure.

Certain genes can increase a person's susceptibility to hearing loss, and genetic forms of hearing loss often appear earlier in life. To identify hearing issues as soon as possible, every newborn receives a hearing screening before leaving the hospital.

Early identification is critical because untreated hearing loss can affect speech and language development.

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration recently lowered the minimum age for cochlear implant candidacy to seven months, allowing more infants with significant hearing loss to receive treatment earlier.

For children born with hearing loss, earlier intervention can help reduce the risk of speech delays and support language development during critical stages of growth.

Protecting your hearing throughout life

Not all hearing loss develops immediately after exposure to loud noise. In many cases, hearing damage accumulates over time.

Dr. Cooper notes that someone who attended loud concerts, worked around machinery or experienced other significant noise exposure years ago may not notice hearing loss until much later in life.

Because hearing changes often occur gradually, regular hearing evaluations can help identify problems early and connect patients with treatment options before hearing loss significantly impacts daily life.

Whether the solution is hearing aids, cochlear implants or another intervention, Dr. Cooper says people should not assume hearing loss is something they simply have to live with. Advances in hearing technology continue to provide opportunities for people of all ages to stay connected to the sounds and conversations that matter most.

Speaking with your primary care provider can help start the conversation and figure out a plan that works for you.