

Hearing Loss Becoming a Silent Epidemic

If you ask most adults, they'll tell you they haven't had a hearing test since grade school. This is **National Hearing Awareness Month** and according to an American Association of Retired Persons (AARP), a recent member survey revealed more of their members get a colonoscopy than a hearing test.

And hearing loss doesn't only affect older people. The Journal of Pediatrics reports 12.5 percent of kids between the ages of six and 19 have hearing loss from listening to loud music, particularly through earbuds at unsafe volumes. That's a problem according to Audiologist Laurel Donaldson of OSF HealthCare's Illinois Neurological Institute in Peoria. Donaldson says the longer a person has uncorrected hearing loss, the greater the risk to the brain of losing the ability to translate the sound of someone talking into comprehensible speech.

Hearing loss that continues as we age also leads to other health issues such as depression and hospital-related admissions due to falls.

"Someone with hearing loss might not be as aware of their environment in order to avoid falls and more of their cognitive load is being devoted to keeping up with sounds and communication and therefore they might not have the cognitive ability to keep up with balance."

In other words, trying to hear takes the focus from navigating around a grandchild's toy or a playful pet. Research also found strong connections between hearing loss and dementia. Among the theories is the idea that the brain gets overwhelmed trying to focus on translating sounds to speech it no longer can access memories. Inability to hear also causes people to withdraw and isolation is another risk factor for dementia.

Noise-induced hearing loss is the most preventable type but Donaldson says people are still not always conditioned to take precautions.

"I'm a musician myself and so I understand the draw to loud music. And, it's a cultural thing as well but people just need to realize there are steps they can take to protect their hearing so they can enjoy music for their *entire* life," said Donaldson.

Some of the latest video game releases have noise levels approaching 120 decibels, the equivalent of a loud rock concert or sandblasting which can cause permanent damage within seven-and-a-half minutes. Donaldson suggests buying inexpensive headphones that can filter music at lower volumes while keeping fidelity.

"Those filters help preserve the sound quality of music which can go a long way in listening to music at a healthy level."

An audiologist can also recommend the best custom hearing protection based on activities such as construction, marching band, or shooting guns.

But, not everyone is eager to see an audiologist. People don't get their hearing checked like they get a regular physical or eye exam because of the association of hearing loss with aging. Donaldson says there are organizations devoting a lot of effort to removing the stigma.

Over-the-Counter Hearing Aids Coming Soon

Donaldson says most people wait seven years to get their hearing checked from the first time they notice a change in their ability to hear. She points out there's a bit of irony in the fact people don't want to appear old by wearing a hearing aid, yet when hearing loss is treated it improves communication and keeps people feeling younger because they're more engaged with people and the world around them.

Today's hearing aids are so tiny they're barely noticeable. However, Medicare doesn't cover hearing aids which can cost more than \$4,000. The FDA has approved less expensive, over-the-counter aids with one company getting fast-track approval for sales before the end of the year. However, that device is worn around the neck and is more like blue tooth headphones.

Donaldson stresses the one-size-fits-all approach that'll likely be represented by the over-the-counter aids won't be helpful for everyone because merely amplifying sound isn't always the right solution.

"People with more severe hearing loss or an abnormal configuration really need the help of an experienced hearing professional like an audiologist to fit those devices appropriately to get the maximum benefit."

Tips for Knowing How Loud is Too Loud

Noise levels are measured in decibels (dB): the higher the number, the louder the noise. Any sound over 85dB can be harmful, especially if you're exposed to it for a long time.

To get an idea of how loud this is:

- whispering – 30dB
- conversation – 60dB
- busy traffic – 70 to 85dB
- motorbike – 90dB
- listening to music on full volume through headphones – 100 to 110dB
- plane taking off – 120dB

You can get smartphone apps that measure noise levels, but make sure they're set up (calibrated) properly to get a more accurate reading.

Make a commitment to get a hearing test for you or insist on one for someone you love. [Visit](#) an OSF HealthCare audiologist near you.