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What Did You Say? I Didn't Hear You!

Within a membership of 2,700 leaders, there is a good chance that some of us may have experienced a degree of hearing loss. Unlike other preventative health interventions like eye exams, when was the last time you had your hearing tested?

Straining to hear makes life less pleasant and, when not addressed, may negatively impact health and psychosocial well-being as an individual may become:

- Withdrawn and socially isolated, which can lead to a risk of depression
- Fatigued, anxious, or confused
- At a greater risk of falling, a risk which increases with the severity of the hearing loss
- At an increased risk of cognitive decline

Hearing loss has been linked to an increased risk of dementia and Alzheimer's disease, due to the association with social isolation and the requirement for more brain energy to process sound, all of which may potentially accelerate cognitive decline.

Research has indicated that hearing loss ranked second in factors driving an increased risk for dementia. The study found that addressing mid-life hearing loss alone could reduce the risk of dementia by nine per cent.

"Studies show a significant correlation, with the risk of dementia increasing with the severity of hearing loss. However, research indicates that using hearing aids to treat hearing loss may help slow cognitive decline."

[Source](#)

Symptoms of Hearing Loss

Hearing loss can be gradual for most people and may not be noticeable until it has progressed significantly.

Scenarios one may experience as hearing declines include:

- Often asking people to repeat themselves.
- Having trouble following a conversation, especially when talking on the telephone or in a noisy environment like a restaurant.
- Thinking people are mumbling.
- Not hearing certain high-pitched sounds, like birds singing.
- Needing to turn up the volume on the television, computer, or tablet.
- Experiencing tinnitus (ringing in the ears).
- Pain in the ear(s) or earache.
- Feeling pressure or fluid inside the ear.
- Experiencing balance problems or dizziness.

Factors That May Cause Hearing Loss

A variety of factors can contribute to a decline in your hearing:

- **Aging:** Our ability to hear decreases as we age due to the degeneration of the structures in the ear.
- **Loud noises:** Exposure to loud noises during leisure activities or at your workplace can damage your hearing.
- **Infections:** Some infections can lead to hearing loss. These can include things like chronic middle ear infections, meningitis, and measles.
- **Injury:** An injury to the head or ear, such as a blow or fall, can potentially lead to hearing loss.
- **Medications:** Some medications can cause hearing loss such as some types of antibiotics, chemotherapy drugs, and diuretics.
- **Genetics:** Genetic factors can predispose someone to develop hearing loss.
- **Physical factors:** Having a perforated eardrum or a buildup of earwax can make hearing difficult.

Get a Hearing Test!

According to HealthLink BC, nearly one out of every four Canadian adults report some level of hearing loss or hearing disability. The number of people with hearing loss rises with age, with about 65 percent of people over the age of 70 reporting hearing problems.

Once you are over age 60, routine hearing tests should be scheduled every two years. Should you detect possible signs of hearing loss, book an appointment to get tested. When hearing loss has been detected, then subsequent hearing tests should be conducted once a year.

A hearing test appointment can be made with one of the following professionals:

- Audiologist - An audiologist specializes in evaluating, diagnosing, treating, and managing hearing loss, as well as other hearing, communication, and balance-related disorders. They have a university education and are equipped to test hearing, and to prescribe, dispense, and fit hearing aids.
- Hearing instrument practitioner - A hearing instrument practitioner has a college education and is equipped to test hearing, and to prescribe, dispense, and fit hearing aids.
- Ear, nose and throat (ENT) doctor - An ENT doctor is a medical specialist in diseases of the ear, nose, throat, and related concerns.

You can make an appointment with an audiologist or a hearing instrument practitioner without a referral.

Prevention!

Prevention is a preferred way to protect our health. These tips can help to prevent or slow hearing loss:

- Use hearing protection when attending loud events like concerts, riding motorcycles or snowmobiles, or working with loud machinery. When you can, take regular quick breaks to help protect your hearing.
- When listening to music in your car, or through headphones or earbuds, turn down the volume low enough that you can hear people speaking around you.
- As we have been told since childhood, don't stick anything in your ear smaller than your elbow! You do not want to push earwax deeper into your ear, nor risk an object becoming stuck or causing an eardrum rupture.
- Regular vaccinations protect against infections, such as influenza, that can cause hearing loss.
- Avoid smoking, which can impair circulation and affect your hearing.

- Get regular exercise – *don't you find exercise is the recommendation for everything?* – to help prevent health issues that can cause hearing problems, like diabetes or high blood pressure.
- Manage any chronic illnesses to prevent further damage.
- If you feel like you are at risk for hearing loss, get regular hearing tests. That way, you will be able to detect changes early.

Treatment Options

See your doctor promptly when you are experiencing hearing issues that interfere with your day-to-day activities. Your physician may refer you to a specialist for further testing should they suspect you are experiencing hearing loss.

Depending on the cause and severity of hearing loss, there are several treatment options:

- **Earwax removal:** Earwax buildup, which can cause temporary hearing loss, can be removed by your doctor using a small tool or suction device.
- **Hearing aids:** Hearing aids are small devices that sit in the ear that amplify sounds in your environment to help you hear more easily.
- **Other assistive devices:** Examples of assistive devices include captioning on your TV, videos, and FM systems, which use a microphone for the speaker and a receiver for the listener.
- **Cochlear implants:** For those with more severe hearing loss, a cochlear implant may help. It converts sounds into electrical signals. These signals travel to your acoustic nerve, and the brain interprets them as sounds.
- **Surgery:** Conditions affecting the structures of your ear, such as the eardrum and bones of the middle ear, can cause hearing loss. In these scenarios, surgery may be recommended.

The Importance of Early Detection And Intervention

It is important to pay specific attention to your hearing so that you can address any decline as soon as possible:

- Early intervention can keep the brain sharp. The longer you wait to address hearing loss, the harder it may be for your brain to adapt to the sound of hearing aids.
- The benefits of hearing aids increase the earlier and more consistently they are used.
- Addressing your hearing loss may assist in slowing cognitive decline and could enhance the quality of social interactions, leading to a more enjoyable life!

Thanks for listening!

Sources

<https://www.healthlinkbc.ca/healthlinkbc-files/hearing-loss-adults>

<https://alzheimer.ca/en/whats-happening/news/how-tackling-hearing-loss-could-reduce-your-risk-dementia>

<https://www.healthline.com/hearing-health>

<https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/diseases/17673-hearing-loss>

<https://www.healthlinkbc.ca/healthlinkbc-files/hearing-loss-adults>

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'R. Morandini', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Rochelle Morandini

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If you would like to contribute or have ideas about what you would like to see in the ReFresh series, we would love to hear from you: contact rochelle@bcpvpa.bc.ca.