



# Senior Series

A partnership between Ohio State University Extension  
and Ohio Aging Network professionals



For more information, visit the Ohio Department of Aging web site at: <http://www.goldenbuckeye.com>  
and Ohio State University Extension's "Aging in Ohio" web site at: <http://www.hec.ohio-state.edu/famlife/aging>

## Have You Heard? Hearing Loss and Older Adults

Accurate estimates of hearing loss are very difficult to obtain. There are two main reasons for this. First, most of the research information available relies on self-reports and the inconsistent use of terms and definitions. Second, it is common for people to deny their hearing loss and/or not realize the extent of their hearing impairment. For example, many hard of hearing people have adapted well to their hearing loss and hearing aids and may not report any hearing difficulties, therefore excluding themselves from national estimates.

With these limitations in mind, research suggests one in every ten Americans has hearing loss. That translates into about 28 million people. Because the prevalence of hearing loss increases with age (1 in 3 among persons over 65), as Baby

Boomers get older, estimates of those with hearing impairment are expected to double the numbers currently reported.

Among seniors, hearing loss is the third most prevalent but treatable disabling condition behind arthritis and hypertension. Frequently, however, hearing loss is misinterpreted as a lack of intelligence or a lack of interest. For those individuals with hearing loss this could not be any further from the truth. The reality is that individuals with hearing loss are sometimes the last to recognize they have a problem. Most hearing losses develop over a period of 25 to 30 years. Since hearing loss may occur very gradually, people often do not realize they cannot hear. Instead, they turn up the television, ask to have conversations repeated, and misunderstand a com-

ment or two. Eventually conversations become more a chore than a pleasure.

## What Is Hearing Impairment?

The term “hearing impairment” refers to any degree of loss of loudness or pitch that is outside the normal range. It is possible for individuals to have a slight hearing loss but not experience any difficulty because it does not interfere with their everyday living. On the other hand, we may all have trouble hearing in noisy areas or when many people are talking all at once. Just as hearing impairments vary, so do people’s coping abilities. An unfortunate consequence of hearing impairment is the feeling of isolation from people and activities.

The medical term for hearing loss that accompanies aging is *presbycusis*. In this situation, an individual may hear you but not be able to understand you. In particular, high-pitched sounds and consonants such as s, f, and z may be indistinguishable from one another. This lack of clarity explains why some older adults will say, “I hear you, but I can’t understand you.” Factors other than aging can contribute to hearing impairment, including noise exposure, injury, medication, disease, and heredity. While some causes of hearing loss may result in permanent changes in hearing, others may be corrected by

medical intervention. Any individuals who have questions about their hearing should have their hearing evaluated.

## Do You Have Hearing Loss?

- Do you tune out from a conversation when there is more than one person talking?
- Do long conversations make you tired or irritable?
- When you respond to people, do they appear puzzled or embarrassed by the response?
- Do you frequently misunderstand people and ask them to repeat what they have said?
- Do you have the television or radio turned up louder than others in the house?
- Have you chosen not to participate in a group activity because of difficulty hearing?

If you answered “yes” to any of these questions, you may have hearing loss.

## What to Do Next

- Have a doctor—either a family physician, internist, or ear, nose, and throat (ENT) specialist—perform a preliminary hearing exam on your ears.

- Ask your doctor for a referral to an audiologist who can perform a comprehensive hearing evaluation in a soundproof room, where you will wear earphones and respond to various sounds. The audiologist can test the degree of hearing, the kind of hearing loss, and the ability to understand speech in different settings.
- If you need a hearing aid, get information about purchasing one and pursue this option carefully.
- If a hearing aid is recommended, give yourself time to adjust to the hearing aid and learn additional communication strategies to help you hear better. For further information, contact a local Speech

and Hearing Center or Speech and Hearing Department of your local hospital.

## Sources

American Speech-Language-Hearing Association, 1997-2004 Information Sheets. On-line at [www.asha.org](http://www.asha.org).

Morris, V. (1996). *How to Care for Aging Parents*. New York: Workman Publishing.

National Institutes of Health. (2001). *Hearing Loss and Older Adults*. NIH Publication No. 01-4913. <http://www.nidcd.nih.gov/health/hearing/older.asp>.

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