

Why Hearing Loss is Happening at Younger Ages

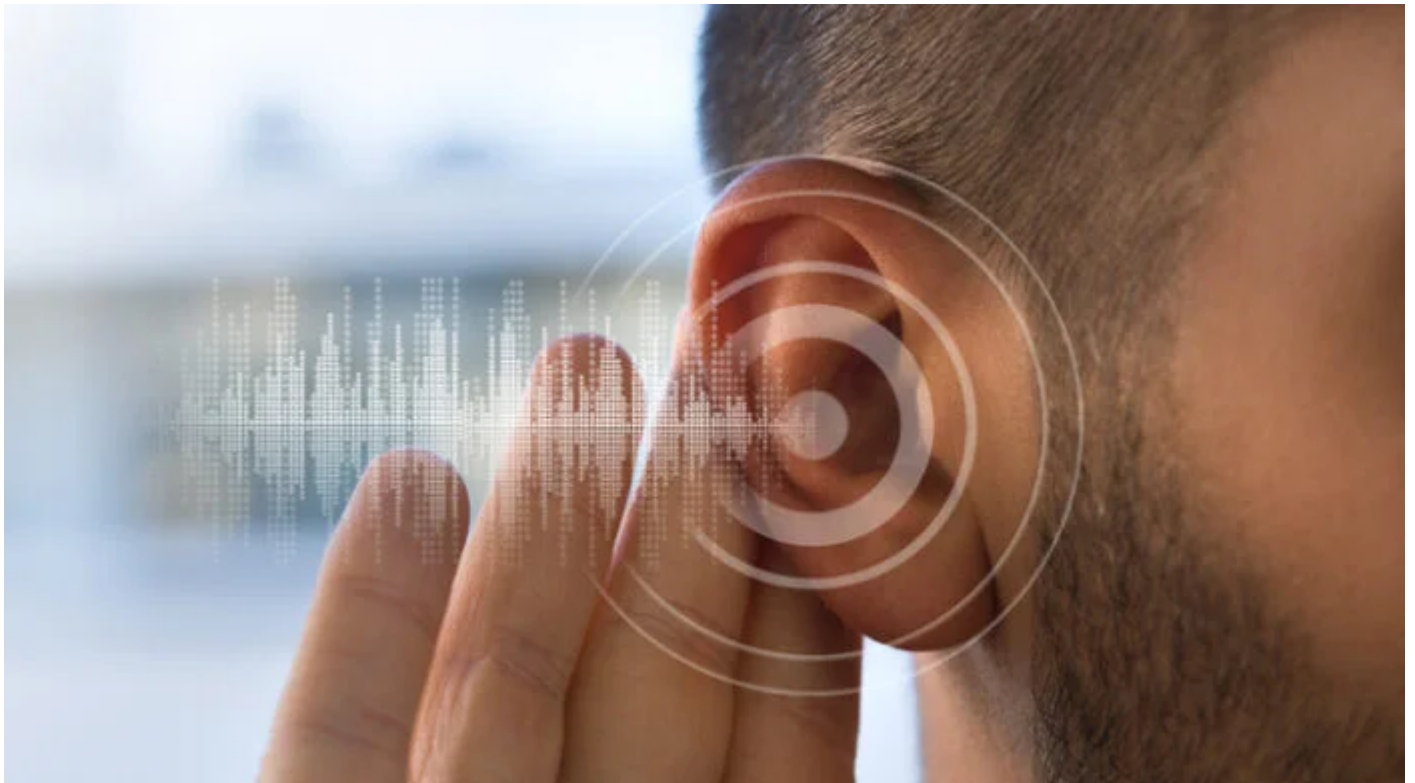
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Why Hearing Loss is Happening at Younger Ages

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Individuals can experience hearing loss at any time in their life. Although it's more common as people age, today 1 in 5 teens experience some form of hearing loss, due to noise exposure or frequent use of headphones.

Because hearing damage happens gradually over time, the early stages of hearing loss often go unnoticed.

Symptoms of hearing loss may include:

- problems understanding words in group conversation or over the phone
- ringing in the ears
- hypersensitivity to sound, or
- turning up the volume on a TV or digital device to hear music and dialogue better

If left undiagnosed, hearing problems can lead to social isolation and other health issues that seem unrelated to hearing, such as depression and cognitive decline. Early intervention is key to preventing further loss.

At any stage, an Audiologist can address the level of hearing damage, advise on prevention and adaptation strategies, and recommend appropriate treatment options.

Hearing Loss is Occurring at Younger Ages

Hearing loss may be minor or severe (or somewhere in between), and can limit the range of sounds one hears. "Hearing loss is categorized by any deficit in hearing above 25 decibels. It comes across different degrees and across different frequencies," said Yunet Solorzano, clinical audiologist at WWMG.

About 2-3 out of every 1000 children in the United States are born with measurable hearing loss and rates climb with age. Nearly a third of people over age 65 experience some difficulty hearing.

Audiologists are concerned at trends that show hearing loss occurring at younger ages.

"We live in a noisier world," said Solorzano. Noise induced hearing loss can happen at any age and research already shows one in five teens have some degree of hearing loss.

"If someone else can hear noise coming from your headphones, the volume is too loud," said Solorzano. Although teens may have a hard time getting the message, loud earbud volumes can be a contributing factor to subsequent hearing loss.

Risk Factors for Hearing Loss

Loud noise is not the only risk factor for hearing damage. "Smokers have 70% higher risk of hearing loss than nonsmokers," said Solorzano.

Because blood vessels in the cochlea are so tiny, high blood pressure, heart disease, diabetes, and other any medical condition that affects blood flow will also have an effect on hearing. Some medications can also harm the cochlea.

“Current research shows that untreated hearing loss is correlated with early cognitive decline,” said Solorzano. Untreated hearing loss is also linked to mental health issues and increased risk of falls and even premature death.

Types of Hearing Loss and their Causes

- **Conductive hearing loss** – occurs when something in the outer or middle ear stops sound from traveling, such as a buildup of ear wax or excess fluid from an ear infection. This type of hearing loss is usually temporary and can be successfully treated with the help of a medical provider such as an Ear, Nose and Throat doctor.
- **Sensorineural hearing loss** – occurs as a result of damage to the cochlea, the organ of hearing. The cochlea is a snail-shaped cavity lined with hair cells that transmit sound to the brain. “With sensorineural hearing loss, what tends to happen is that the exposure to noise destroys some of the little hair cells inside of the cochlea,” said Solorzano. Once destroyed, these cells are not replaced, leading to cumulative damage over time. This type of hearing loss is permanent.
- **Age-related hearing loss.** “The most common type of hearing loss is the one that occurs with the aging process,” said Solorzano. Genetics can be a factor that predisposes people to early hearing loss. Other risk factors include: exposure to loud noise, and certain medical and environmental factors. Although we can’t change our genetics, we can do a lot to manage the other risk factors that can affect how fast hearing loss progresses.

Preventing Hearing Loss

Initial or progressive damage to the cochlea (sensorineural hearing loss) can be preventable. So taking prevention seriously is essential to your health.

“The level of noise exposure and the amount of time that you’re exposed to that noise; those two things interact to cause damage to hearing. We always recommend hearing protection of any kind that’s available when being exposed to loud noises,” said Solorzano.

This is true for those who work with machinery, heavy equipment, in military or industrial environments, or people who listen to audio devices or attend concerts.

Because damage to hair cells is a function of both volume and duration, less extreme noises experienced repetitively over long periods can also be harmful. Workplace noises like dentists’ drills, salon hairdryers, power tools, and even less frequent exposures like mowing the lawn all merit ear protection. *View chart of noise levels*

To protect hearing, consider wearing earplugs or protective ear muffs. Even cheap foam earplugs are better than nothing, but anyone who regularly needs ear protection would benefit most from working with an audiologist to obtain custom earplugs. These individually molded earplugs will reduce overall volume while filtering noise to permit desired sound frequencies through.

Symptoms of Hearing Loss (at Any Age)

One of the first symptoms of hearing loss is turning up the TV, speakers, or headphone volume louder than other people find comfortable. Another is having to focus intently during conversations or frequently asking people to repeat themselves.

“What is happening is that you are missing some of the consonants in people’s speech. You may not be aware that there’s hearing loss because you’re only missing a couple of the tones that are important for speech, but your brain is aware that you’re not getting the full picture,” said Solorzano.

It is common for others to notice your hearing loss before you do.

“Usually, a spouse will be the first to notice when someone has hearing loss, because they are the ones that are repeating themselves,” said Solorzano.

Tinnitus, a ringing or buzzing sound in the ears, is another early sign of hearing loss. Although there are other possible causes for tinnitus, “A lot of the time tinnitus is part of the brain becoming hyperactive because it’s missing some of the sounds that it’s used to

hearing,” Solorzano explains.

Any of these signs indicate that a hearing exam is in order. Depending on the cause and severity of the symptoms, multiple interventions are available, and not all patients with hearing problems will need hearing aids.

How Hearing Aids Can Help (If You Need Them)

When the part of the brain that decodes what we hear is not being stimulated, it becomes dormant over time. And when an individual waits too long to seek medical help, the brain has to relearn how to decode sounds.

“We want to add some kind of amplification device that will help the brain continue to receive access to sounds so that it can continue to be stimulated and doesn’t lose the ability for speech understanding,” said Solorzano.

If recommended, today’s hearing aids are much smaller, and more user-friendly than in the past. “Hearing aids have come a long way from back in the day when they were big and clunky and having feedback issues.” Nowadays there are nearly invisible in-ear and behind the ear options. Rechargeable batteries don’t have to be changed, and there are even iPhone compatible versions that connect to a phone and can double as earbuds.

Diagnosis of Hearing Loss

Although hearing loss is widespread, it often goes undiagnosed because many individuals don’t notice its gradual onset. In addition, because hearing loss is stigmatized by its association with old age and hearing aids, many people ignore the symptoms and just hope they’ll go away.

“It usually takes someone 7 years to seek help for hearing loss after noticing that there is any difficulty,” said Solorzano. That’s a problem because untreated hearing loss can have some unexpected consequences.

Treatment for Hearing Loss

“Other than protecting from noise exposure and avoiding different medications that can be [damaging to the ears], there really isn’t anything that you can do to stop hearing loss entirely,” said Solorzano. What audiologists focus on is managing the effect that hearing

loss has on the brain and helping the patient adapt to the changing relationship with their environment.

Although prevention is preferable to progressive hearing loss, compensating for hearing damage no longer has to involve an uncomfortable tradeoff. Not all patients with hearing problems need hearing aids. Multiple interventions are available depending on the cause and severity of the patient's symptoms.

Who Should Get a Hearing Assessment

Many people are first alerted to undiagnosed health issues through a hearing test.

If your child or teen is showing any of the initial symptoms of hearing loss, it's worth getting their hearing checked by an Audiologist. This will help gauge the current state of their health, and provide you with guidance to help prevent future damage.

Even if you don't have symptoms of hearing loss, if you're nearing the age of 55 or work in a high-noise environment, it's a good idea to see an audiologist for a baseline hearing assessment.

"Getting the hearing tested and knowing where it stands is important because it's related to a lot of other health factors, even if you don't need – or are not ready to move forward with – hearing aids," said Solorzano. Because of the prevalence of co-occurring medical issues, a hearing loss diagnosis (of any degree) can indicate to your primary care provider that there is a need to test for other health conditions.

Where to Get Screened for Hearing Loss

Get started with a hearing screening today to assess your hearing and risk level. WWMG's Audiologist can recommend adaptation strategies and a customized treatment plan with the ultimate goal of improving your quality of life. Contact us to request an appointment today.