Hearing loss - how it affects people

Summary
- Hearing loss can be caused by physical problems, including damage to the hair cells in the inner ear.
- One in six Australians has some degree of hearing loss.
- Hearing loss has impacts on mental health, social participation and work life.

Research indicates that one in six Australians has some form of hearing loss. Many people with hearing loss experience a drop in self-esteem and confidence because of their impaired ability to communicate with other people. Having hearing loss can also limit one's ability to learn to speak a new language.

Hearing loss refers to reduced hearing, which can be caused by a variety of factors. It can either be congenital or acquired later on in life. It can range from mild hearing loss to profound hearing loss.

Hearing loss can affect personal and work life

Hearing loss can affect a person in three main ways:
- fewer educational and job opportunities due to impaired communication
- social withdrawal due to reduced access to services and difficulties communicating with others
- emotional problems caused by a drop in self-esteem and confidence.

There are two main types of hearing loss

'Conductive' hearing loss is caused by obstructions or malfunctions in the outer or middle ear. It can be caused by:
- outer or middle ear infections and malfunctions
- a damaged ear drum
- impacted ear wax.

'Sensorineural' hearing loss is caused by damage to the hair cells in the inner ear. It can be caused by:
- ageing
- exposure to loud noise, such as machinery or loud music
- diseases such as meningitis
- certain chemicals and medications, known as ototoxic medications.

Other disorders of the ear

Other disorders of the ear include:
- tinnitus – noises or ringing in the ears or head
- Meniere's disease – symptoms may include vertigo (dizziness), tinnitus, hearing loss and nausea
- acoustic neuroma – benign tumours on the acoustic nerve.

Tips on speaking to a person with hearing loss

The following tips might be helpful next time you talk with a hearing impaired person:
- Get the person’s attention.
• Face the person and stand close to them.
• Have the light on your face and do not cover your mouth.
• Speak more slowly than usual.
• Raise your voice if you have to, but try not to shout.
• Speak expressively and use face, hand and body movements.
• Be ready to use a pen and paper.

Communication tips for someone with hearing loss

• Tell people about your hearing loss.
• Ask people to speak clearly.
• Encourage your communication partners to face you, speak up or speak more slowly.
• Advise people to gain your attention first and face you when talking with you.
• Ask questions about what you missed.
• Suggest rephrasing the information.

Where to get help

• Better Hearing Australia, Victorian Branch Tel. (03) 9510 1577 or 1300 BHA VIC (242 842), TTY (03) 9510 3499

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