

Pardon Me? Hearing Loss in the Elderly.

Imagine going through life unable to understand what people are saying or having to constantly ask people to repeat themselves. Imagine the feelings of frustration and isolation when you can't participate in the conversations going on around you or express yourself to family, friends and especially strangers. This is the reality faced by thousands of Canadians, particularly seniors, who suffer from hearing loss.

The statistics are staggering. According to Health Canada, approximately 10% of the population, 20% of those over the age of 65 and 40% of those over the age of 75 have a significant hearing problem. At least 80% of the elderly in nursing homes have impaired hearing and hearing loss is identified as the third most prevalent chronic disability among older adults, superseded only by arthritis and hypertension.

There are three different types of hearing loss: conductive, sensorineural, and central deafness. Conductive hearing loss results from the blockage or interference of sound to the inner ear. People with this type of hearing loss often complain that their own voice sounds loud while other voices sound muffled. Sensorineural hearing loss is caused by problems of the nervous system in the inner ear. People with this type of hearing loss may have trouble understanding the speech of others while being very sensitive to loud sounds. The individual may experience clicking, ringing or hissing noises. They generally do not suffer from total deafness. Central deafness is caused by damage to the hearing centres in the brain and is very rare. A person with central deafness can hear normally however has difficulty understanding what is heard. Central deafness is attributed to stroke, lengthy high fever or head trauma.

Hearing loss associated with aging can be so gradual that those affected by it often aren't even aware that a problem exists. Many older people have no difficulty hearing lower pitched sounds, while sounds with a higher pitch can go undetected. Others, who hear most sounds distinctly, may be unaware of the sounds they are missing—attributing their hearing difficulties to other people not speaking clearly enough. This can lead to stressful social situations and, eventually, to increasing isolation. Some basic warning signs to

watch for include: speech and other sounds that seem faint, muffled, distorted, slurred or lack clarity; experiencing difficulty understanding someone speaking from a distance, conversing in areas with noisy backgrounds or understanding speech that others find clear.

Methods for addressing hearing impairments are numerous and varied. 3.5% of Canadian adults use sign language and 12.0% practice lip reading. 30.3% use technical aids and 88.9% of those utilize hearing aids. 31.5% of Canadian adults use volume controls on telephones, 2.6% use amplifiers and an additional 1.88% make use of telecommunication devices.

The importance of audiology services is underscored by the aging of the Canadian population. In 1993, 12% of the Canadian population was made up of seniors. The percentage of this age group is expected to rise to 14.5% by the year 2011 and 21.8% by the year 2031. Since both the incidence and prevalence of hearing loss increase with age, it is obvious that the numbers of individuals requiring treatment for hearing difficulties will rise dramatically over the next 20 years.

The effects of undetected and untreated hearing problems can be very serious and our golden years should not be spent in a communications wasteland, shut off from what's happening around us. There's no reason why more elderly Canadians can't continue to enjoy engaging, productive and rewarding lives but to do so, they have to be able to hear. Detection and treatment is vital. If you suspect a hearing problem, act right away. An audiologist can determine the exact nature of a person's hearing difficulties, assess the severity of any hearing loss and then recommend treatment. Most importantly, remember this - it's never too early to be tested. The onset of adult hearing loss can occur as early as the third or fourth decade of life.