

Study examines prevalence of hearing loss in the US

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Hearing loss may be more prevalent in American adults than previously reported, according to a study in the July 28 issue of *Archives of Internal Medicine*, one of the JAMA/Archives journals.

Hearing loss can be a disabling condition affecting verbal language processing and limiting communication and social connectivity, according to background information in the article. "Such communication difficulties negatively affect work productivity, health-related quality of life and cognitive and emotional status. These disabilities impede health care access and use, with possible adverse consequences to health and survival."

Hearing impairment is known to be highly common and is considered to be a societal problem. Although national estimates of hearing loss are lacking, the incidence of this condition in the U.S. is predicted to have risen significantly because of the aging population and growing use of personal listening devices.

Yuri Agrawal, M.D., of Johns Hopkins Hospital, Baltimore, and colleagues evaluated data from a large national survey, including hearing tests, administered to 5,742 Americans age 20 to 69 from 1999 to 2004. Researchers assessed hearing loss of 25 decibels or higher at speech frequencies (0.5, 1, 2 and 4 kilohertz) and at high frequencies (3, 4 and 6 kilohertz). Demographic characteristics and known risk factors for hearing loss (smoking, noise exposure and cardiovascular risks) were also noted.

From 2003 to 2004, 16.1 percent (an estimated 29 million) of American adults had speech frequency hearing loss in one (8.9 percent) or both ears (7.3 percent). "Thirty-one percent of participants (equivalent to an estimated 55 million Americans) had high-frequency hearing loss [12 percent in one ear and 19 percent in both]," the authors write. Hearing loss, especially at high frequency, was found in participants age 20 to 29 (8.5 percent prevalence) and in those age 30 to 39 (17 percent prevalence).

Men were 5.5 times more likely than women to have hearing loss. Black participants were 70 percent less likely to have loss of hearing than white participants with white and Mexican American men having the highest occurrence of high-frequency hearing loss and hearing loss in both ears. "Increases in hearing loss prevalence occurred earlier among participants with smoking, noise exposure and cardiovascular risks," the authors write.

Source: JAMA and Archives Journals

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