

Our Health: Louder and louder world harms our hearing

February 27 2009, By Jane Glenn Haas

So much noise. Rock concerts. Traffic. iPods. Always something in your ear. Until nature demands silence.

"We don't know what's going to happen to the kids with plug-ins in their ears," says audiologist Janell Reid. "There's a huge concern about stimulating the ears directly for a long time.

"We do know that we are seeing much younger patients with hearing loss. It's becoming prevalent in the 50s and 60s."

Reid is the head of the Tustin (Calif.) Hearing Center, where she leads a team of five audiologists.

Q. What types of hearing problems are usual in patients in their 50s and 60s?

A. They have trouble hearing in situations where there's background noise. If there are competing sounds, they have to ask for repetition. Despite asking you to "say it again," they may misunderstand.

Q. What about in quiet environments?

A. These people usually don't have problems in quiet places. But many notice they have problems hearing even if the only sound is water running.

People chattering, background music, a lively restaurant, for example, creates a bigger challenge. And noise is changing and increasing. Many restaurants today have hard surfaces that magnify sounds, for instance.

Q. So they become aware they have problems hearing when there is other sound in the room. The solution?

A. There is only one treatment and that is amplification. Ninety percent of sound loss is nerve damage. These people need a hearing aid.

Q. I can't imagine a 50- or 60-year-old easily accepting a hearing aid.

A. You would be surprised. The demand for imperceptible aids has led to the development of small, cosmetically discreet aids. These are not your grandfather's hearing aid. There are multiple manufacturers, but Passion by Widex which you can view on the Internet - is a good example.

Called an open receiver, these aids are virtually unnoticeable and are very effective in noisy environments.

Q. Are they acceptable for men and women?

A. Men aren't able to hide the aid as well as women. These are so small and fit just behind the ear. Because they can match the hair color, women can easily hide them.

Q. Sounds expensive.

A. Prices range from \$1,500 to \$3,500. Some are covered by insurance but not Medicare, of course.

Q. When should people have their hearing tested?

A. A hearing test before you notice any initial trouble will give us a baseline to determine the future degree of hearing loss.

Tinnitus, ringing in the ear, also can be helped by amplification aids.

The aids seem to keep the ears busy with meaningful sound so the ringing diminishes. There is no known cure for tinnitus right now.

Q. Are both ears equal _ that is, do both suffer hearing loss equally?

A. Yes. That's why you need amplification in both ears.

Q. Why bother to treat mild hearing loss?

A. Obviously, we hope it won't get worse. And we find that the more hearing loss people suffer, the more they isolate from others often out of embarrassment. We're talking quality of life here.

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(Jane Glenn Haas writes for The Orange County (Calif.) Register. E-mail her at jghaas@cox.net)

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