



## Hearing Loss Awareness

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World Hearing Day was observed on March 3 with the theme “From Communities to Classrooms: Hearing Care for Every Child.” Hearing loss affects approximately 90 million children and adolescents aged 5-19 years worldwide, according to the [World Health Organization](#). Over 60% of hearing loss in this age group is preventable. But for those of us who are aging, the time to prevent permanent hearing loss is behind us.

According to the [Mayo Clinic](#), more than half of those over age 75 in the U.S. have some age-related hearing loss. While general aging accounts for some hearing loss, other causes such as loud noise, heredity, job-related noise (farming, construction, or factory work), noise at play (firearms, jet engines, snowmobiles, motorcycling, listening to loud music), some medications, and some illnesses can also cause serious hearing loss for the elderly.

Hearing loss has a significant impact on the quality of life for older adults. From having trouble understanding what others are saying on the telephone to finding it hard to follow a conversation can result in social isolation. We all know people who compensate for hearing loss by asking others to repeat what was said and turning up the volume on the television. Untreated hearing loss can lead to other age-related problems. In an article for NCOA, [Juliette Sterkens](#), an audiologist, reports that “when the brain puts effort towards understanding words because of hearing loss, it can take brain resources away from other important areas like memory and balance. Hearing loss increases the risk of dementia, depression, heart attacks, and falls.”

If you are experiencing hearing loss, an audiologist is trained to diagnose hearing loss, but your primary care physician can be an excellent resource for you as well and a source of a referral to a hearing professional. Diagnosis of hearing loss can include a physical exam where a health care provider looks for causes such as earwax or infection. There are sound screening tests to determine what volume you can hear. Finally, an audiometer will be used by the audiologist. In this test, sounds and words are directed through earphones to each ear. The tone is repeated at low levels to find the quietest sound you can hear. Once a diagnosis is made, treatment can be recommended. It might include removing earwax blockage, surgery, hearing aids, or cochlear implants.

If you know someone with hearing loss, there are many ways you can help the person remain connected and avoid becoming isolated. The [National Institute on Aging](#) suggests that when in a group, make a point to include people with hearing loss in the conversation. In restaurants and at social gatherings, find a quiet place to talk to help reduce background noise. Stand in good lighting and use facial expressions or gestures to give clues. Face the person and speak clearly. Maintain eye contact. Speak a little louder than normal but don't shout. Try to speak naturally and at a reasonable speed. Don't hide your mouth, eat or chew gum while speaking. Repeat yourself if necessary, using different words. Try to make sure only one person talks at a time. Finally, be patient. People with hearing loss may also be frustrated by their condition. Stay positive and relaxed. Ask how you can help.

While hearing loss may be inevitable when we age, we can take steps to reduce the severity and help those with hearing loss remain connected to social and support systems.