

Hearing loss in adults

Hearing is one of our most important senses. It helps us to communicate, to be warned about danger and to be aware of the world around us.

Nearly 1 out of every 4 Canadian adults report some level of hearing loss or hearing disability. The prevalence of hearing loss rises with age. About 65 percent of people over the age of 70 have hearing problems.

People over the age of 60 should schedule routine hearing tests every 2 years. If hearing loss is detected, hearing tests should be conducted once a year.

What are the signs that you may have hearing loss?

You may have hearing loss if you:

- Find that speech is muffled or unclear
- Ask people to repeat themselves or speak louder
- Have difficulty understanding or following conversations
- Must concentrate to understand what people say
- Have ringing, hissing or clicking noises in your ear

What are the different types of hearing loss?

There are 2 types of hearing loss: conductive hearing loss and sensorineural hearing loss. A person can have hearing loss that is part conductive and part sensorineural.

Conductive hearing loss

Conductive hearing loss is caused by a problem in the outer or middle part of the ear. This may be due to a wax blockage, punctured eardrum or an ear infection. Certain types of conductive hearing loss can be temporary and often can be medically or surgically treated. Those that cannot be treated

medically or surgically may be recommended to wear a hearing aid.

Sensorineural hearing loss

Sensorineural hearing loss is caused by a problem with the inner part of the ear or hearing nerve. This type of hearing loss tends to be progressive and permanent. Aging is the number one cause of sensorineural hearing loss. It can also be caused by very loud noise, disease, injury or certain medication. It can also be congenital.

Congenital hearing loss refers to hearing loss that was present when you were born due to genetics or other factors or conditions. It can be hereditary (genetic) or it can be the result of other factors or conditions. This hearing loss can be either conductive, sensorineural or both.

Sudden sensorineural hearing loss

This type of hearing loss is commonly known as sudden deafness. It is most often an unexplained, rapid loss of hearing in one or both ears. The most common causes are viral or bacterial infections, medications that harm the sensory cells in the inner ear, or autoimmune diseases. This type of hearing loss is most commonly treated with corticosteroids.

This type of hearing loss should be considered a medical emergency. Anyone who experiences these symptoms should visit a health care provider immediately.

What should I do if I think I have hearing loss?

If you think you have hearing loss, you should make an appointment for a hearing test with one of the following professionals:

- **Audiologist** - An audiologist specializes in evaluating, diagnosing, treating and managing hearing loss, as well as other hearing, communication and balance-related disorders.

They have a university education and are equipped to test hearing, and to prescribe, dispense and fit hearing aids.

- **Hearing instrument practitioner** - A hearing instrument practitioner has a college education and is equipped to test hearing, and to prescribe, dispense and fit hearing aids.
- **Ear, nose and throat (ENT) doctor** - An ENT doctor is a medical specialist in diseases of the ear, nose, throat and related concerns

You can make an appointment with an audiologist or a hearing instrument practitioner without a referral.

If your hearing seems to deteriorate or drop rapidly (over the span of 1 to 3 days), you should seek emergency medical attention immediately.

Will a hearing aid help?

Hearing aids do not cure hearing loss. They help improve your hearing and your ability to communicate. A hearing aid is a small battery-powered electronic device. It is programmed specifically to meet the needs of a person's individual hearing loss. It can be adapted to different situational needs (such as social, recreational and work environments).

People with hearing loss can also improve communication with counselling or environmental changes.

Do I have to pay for a hearing aid?

Hearing aids are not covered under the Medical Services Plan (MSP). There are limited alternative funding options available that your audiologist or hearing instrument practitioner can advise you on.

What are the risks associated with hearing loss on older adults?

When hearing loss remains untreated in older adults, they may experience a significant reduction in quality of life. They are at risk of poorer long-term health outcomes. Adults with untreated hearing loss may become:

- Withdrawn and socially isolated which can lead to risk of depression
- Fatigued, anxious or confused
- Are at an increased risk of cognitive decline
- Are at greater risk of falling which increases with the severity of the hearing loss

The importance of early detection and intervention

Identifying and aiding hearing loss early helps preserve the brain's ability to receive and use the incoming sounds in a meaningful way.

- Early intervention keeps the brain sharp. The longer you wait to aid hearing loss, the harder it is for your brain to adapt to the sound of hearing aids
- The benefits of hearing aids increase the sooner and more consistently you use them
- You have more time to plan or find funding for the expenses associated with hearing loss

For more information

Contact the College of Speech and Hearing Health Professionals of BC for a list of audiologists and hearing instrument practitioners in your area or visit <https://cshbc.ca> to view the registry online.

Visit BC Association of Speech Language Pathologists and Audiologists (BCASLPA) at <https://speechandhearingbc.ca>.

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