

Caregiver's Corner Column (May 2011)

Hearing Loss an Invisible Condition

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Hearing loss is currently the most pervasive physical challenge in America and an "Invisible Condition". One in every six people worldwide and about 30 million Americans are affected by hearing loss, the equivalent number of people who own a car. As the population ages and noise pollution increases, hearing loss becomes a larger issue for more people.

How do you know when you are losing your hearing? You miss out on important details when talking with others, often losing entire chunks of conversation. You become confused while receiving instructions. You will often turn up the volume on the TV or radio. You may not hear the phone or doorbell. Restaurants and bars are very noisy to begin with. When you are losing your hearing, conversations in noisy places becomes impossible to understand.

Even though hearing loss is the third largest health issue (after blood pressure/heart disease and cancer) 75% take no action and most people wait seven years before being treated by an audiologist and fitted for hearing aids. Many have a very difficult time facing their hearing loss, which is a common step of aging, just like graying hair and needing glasses. One third of Americans between ages 65-75 experience hearing loss and half of Americans over the age of 75 have lost some of their hearing.

Hearing loss leads to isolation, loneliness and depression. It can affect relationships due to communication barriers. Untreated hearing loss has also been linked to an increased rise of dementia and cognitive decline. Why is this? The brain loses the ability to recognize sounds as your ability to hear the full spectrum of sound declines. As hearing declines and remains untreated, physiological difficulties associated with isolation become more apparent as people losing their hearing tend to withdraw from conversations and avoid social situations.

Overwhelming evidence shows that the use of hearing aids brings major improvement to the quality of life. Overall health benefits include a more active role in family, increased self-confidence, greater earning power, and stronger social and business skills. Today's hearing aids are NOT your grandparents' aids. The hearing aids have been designed to be more inconspicuous. They are smaller and slight behind the ear. There are many different styles and fits to choose from. The new technology has improved the hearing aid dramatically. Now hearing aids offer directional microphones, telephone adaptors, Bluetooth technology, and remote controls. A hearing impaired person can actually listen to an iPod or watch TV with a wireless signal directly to their hearing aids. This advanced new digital technology in hearing aids provides more than amplification. Digital hearing aids actually restore sounds lost and are personally programmed for the individual's specific loss. Many of the public venues and

churches are becoming “looped” so the T-coil in the hearing aid actually picks up the audio/sound, which is sent directly to the hearing aid instead of being picked up by the aid’s microphones.

The ability to hear keeps us informed about our surroundings and is the key to understanding the world around us. We must never take this gift for granted and encourage those we love to get their hearing tested. With the right help this daily challenge can be overcome.

For local resources and literature contact Deaf and Hard of Hearing Services at 616-732-7358 or online at: www.deafhhs.org; or the Hearing Loss Association of America (HLAA) at 616-361-6871 or online at: www.hearinglossgrandrapids.org.

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