

Caregiver's Corner Column (May 2012)

Hearing Loss Often Overlooked, Easy to Detect

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Did you know hearing loss affects 31 million Americans? Unfortunately, only 20% of those who need hearing help receive it. Hearing loss is a condition that, in most cases, develops gradually; many people do not even realize they are affected. Many times it is the family, friends and caregivers who first realize there may be a hearing loss. As a caregiver do you have to repeat yourself over and over, or speak so loudly you strain your voice? We know it can be challenging for everyone involved. Fortunately, modern hearing care has become more aware of the symptoms of hearing loss. This increased awareness has helped millions hear better and enjoy life more.

Hearing is one of the basic ways we communicate and interact with each other and the environment. Undetected hearing loss can have serious consequences. According to a survey by the National Council on the Aging (NCOA), older people with undetected hearing loss are more likely to report depression, anxiety, paranoia, emotional problems, and reduced social activity. The survey concluded that seniors who treat their hearing loss have better relationships with their families, improved mental health, greater independence, and stronger feelings of security.

Although hearing loss is a very personal condition, the symptoms of hearing loss are fairly consistent. Here are some of the questions we often ask ... as a caregiver feel free to ask them.

- 1. Do people seem to mumble more frequently?*
- 2. Do you hear, but have trouble understanding all the words in conversation?*
- 3. Do you often ask people to repeat themselves?*
- 4. Do you find telephone conversation increasingly difficult?*
- 5. Does your family, friends or neighbors complain that you play the TV or radio too loudly?*
- 6. Are you able to hear normal household sounds, such as the dripping of a faucet or the ringing of a doorbell?*
- 7. Do you have difficulty understanding conversation when in a large group or crowd?*

If the answers are yes to a few of these questions, a full hearing evaluation should be completed. A full evaluation consists of an otoscopic exam, a complete pure tone test, a bone conduction test, and the most important...a speech discrimination test. Pure tone testing tells us some of the story, but the speech discrimination test helps us to know which phonics of speech you may be struggling with. Our brain, the auditory cortex, does the understanding of speech for us. The good news for you, the caregiver or loved one, is a few hearing practitioners will come to you for the evaluation free of obligation or charge. We realize addressing a hearing loss may add one more thing to your never ending list of appointments. Not to mention for some, trips to an office are just too fatiguing or difficult.

If a hearing loss is discovered and instruments are recommended, Here are some things you should be aware of... hearing aids will not bring you instant gratification. The ability to hear again can be relearned, but not simply purchased. Technology has advanced the hearing industry

tremendously in just the past few years. We have the ability to filter out background noise, amplify only where needed, and manage feedback issues through programming. Better hearing takes a good working relationship with your practitioner, be honest, frank and detailed about what you like or don't like about hearing instruments.

For success there must be a willingness to learn, a commitment not to quit, time to practice wearing the hearing aids, patience while the brain acclimates to ambient sounds and noises, and most importantly a positive attitude. If you are able to commit to better hearing, congratulations!

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