

To more good ears!

Hearing is not just for communication, speech and learning, but plays a part in reducing falls, building good emotional health and maintaining cognitive function.

By Adjunct A/Prof Lynne Lim, Ear Nose Throat - Head & Neck Surgeon

We hear, thanks to the 20,000 hearing hair cells in our cochlea inner ear. These cells, unlike those of birds and frogs, cannot regenerate once damaged. But thankfully, with rapid advances in the rehabilitation of hearing loss over the past two decades, there is a hearing option for almost everyone today.

Causes of hearing loss

In Singapore, 4 in 1,000 are born with hearing loss and age also accounts for the reduced ability to hear. According to the National Health Survey, 1 in 5 people in their 50s suffer hearing loss and the rate jumps to 2 in 5 for those in their 60s. By the time people are in their 70s and older, hearing loss impacts between 60 to 80% of people.

Hearing loss can also be due to genetics, congenital infections such as rubella or cytomegalovirus, anatomical ear deformities and peri-natal events (such as prolonged intensive care, severe jaundice, hearing-toxic drugs or brain infections). Loud noises – especially in the form of music, workplace noise and environmental noise – can also lead to hearing loss over time.

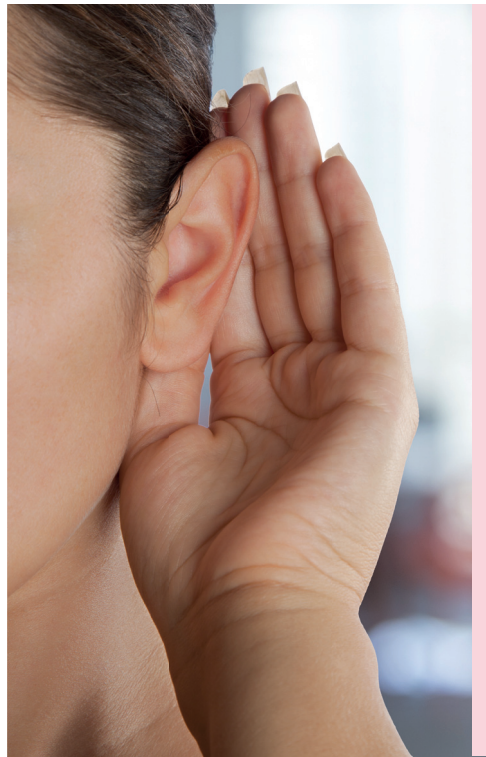
Some conditions, such as ear infections, tumours, perforated ear drums, dislocated or diseased middle ear bones, as well as some nose and throat conditions, can impact the ears too. These are treatable and you should seek medical advice early to improve the chances of cure. The leading cause of hearing loss worldwide is, however, age-related hearing loss, a natural part of growing older.

Addressing hearing loss

For treatable conditions, medication, surgeries and radiation therapy can be helpful in addressing hearing loss. For permanent or impaired hearing loss due to age, congenital defects or disease, highly sophisticated hearing aids are now available, although patient awareness and take-up is low. With features such as noise cancellation, wireless, remote control and cosmetic properties, these advanced hearing aids can rehabilitate 90% of hearing loss and greatly improve quality of life.

These aids require professional medical advice to fit and adjust – a matter of both science and art. A hearing aid, far from being a mere accessory, is a sophisticated medical device and individualised treatment is important to ensure optimal rehabilitation.

Where hearing aids are not sufficient, middle ear



implants, bone anchored hearing aids and cochlear implants are ideal. These wondrous advancements in science now allow even a patient with total deafness to hear again and communicate with their loved ones.

It is important to raise awareness of proper and adequate hearing loss treatment not only for children but for adults too. In the elderly, hearing loss has been associated with increased risk of falls, depression, dementia and memory problems. Tinnitus (ringing in the ear) is often associated with hearing loss, and further frustrates and disturbs people, but many do not know that there are available medications, maskers and tinnitus retraining options available.

For children, early intervention is critical and it is important to be rigorous about a complete hearing evaluation, which may require more than just awake hearing tests. Auditory brainstem testing under sedation, radiology scans, auditory processing specialised tests and behavioural testing are very important to identify complex diagnoses.



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