

Are you having hearing problems?

Sensorineural hearing loss occurs when sensory receptors (hair cells) in the inner ear (cochlea) or hearing nerve pathways to the brain are damaged. It is usually permanent and cannot be treated medically or surgically, but hearing aids almost always help.

Hearing loss most commonly results from age-related changes in the inner ear. Other possible causes are excessive noise exposure, drugs that are toxic to the auditory system, certain viruses or diseases, head trauma, and genetic or familial disorders.

If you think you may have a hearing loss or are having difficulty communicating, tell your doctor immediately.

What are the signs that I may be losing my hearing?

You may:

- complain that people are mumbling
- continually ask people to repeat themselves
- avoid noisy rooms, social occasions, or family gatherings
- prefer the TV or radio louder than other people do
- have difficulty understanding people when you can't see their faces
- have trouble hearing at the movies or theater, your house of worship, or other public places
- have difficulty following conversations in a group
- become impatient, irritable, frustrated, or withdrawn.

Why can I hear people talk but not understand what they're saying?

Hearing loss not only reduces your ability to hear normally audible sound, it interferes with your ability to detect particular sounds. High-pitched consonants (such as *d*, *f*, *sh*, *s*, *t*, and *th*) become harder to hear than low-pitched vowels. The high-pitched consonant sounds carry the meaning of words and help us understand speech, but in normal conversation, they're softer than the less important low-pitched vowel sounds. So conversation may *sound* loud

enough, but the words may not be clear.

How is hearing loss diagnosed?

Audiologists—health care professionals who specialize in hearing—conduct a comprehensive evaluation to determine the degree and type of hearing loss and its effect on your ability to communicate in everyday life. The exam is conducted with special instruments in a sound-dampened room. Medical diagnosis of ear disease is performed by ear, nose, and throat doctors (also known as ENTs or otolaryngologists).

How often should I have a hearing test?

After age 50, you should have your hearing tested every 2 years. But it's important to request a hearing test immediately if you notice a sudden change in hearing, increased ringing in the ears (tinnitus), or dizziness.

How is hearing loss treated?

Hearing aids, which work better than ever because of digital technology, help many people. Your audiologist will talk to you about the different kinds of hearing aids available and what you can realistically expect when you use them. Together you'll decide which one is best for you.

People who use hearing aids report better personal relationships, an easier time communicating, improved mental health, and a greater sense of control over their lives.

Where can I get more information?

American Academy of Audiology
800-AAA-2336 <http://www.audiology.org>

American Academy of Otolaryngology, Head, and Neck Surgery
703-836-4444 <http://www.aaohns.org>

American Speech-Language-Hearing Association
800-638-8255 <http://www.asha.org>