

Older and wiser: How to know when to get help for hearing loss

Age related hearing loss affects up to 65 per cent of older adults in British Columbia

Margaret Coates

May 26, 2024



North Shore News Files

Staying socially connected is one of the ways to continue leading a happy and fulfilling life amid hearing loss.

While I was out with friends a while back, I noticed that one of the members of our group was unable to fully contribute to the conversations.

His wife appeared to be patiently drawing him into our discussion with little luck. Recently I met him

again at a gathering and this time he had no trouble being an active part of the group, listening and talking avidly with us. The difference was that he had been tested for hearing loss and is now using hearing aids.

Hearing is one of our most important senses. Good hearing allows us to fully engage in community, with our friends and family. It supports mental wellbeing, and it contributes to physical health.

Unfortunately, many of us over the age of 65 experience hearing loss and this can negatively impact our lives. I know that my hearing is not what it was, nor is my spouse's, and this sometimes causes a little friction (both of us are unlike the patient spouse I mentioned above).

At a recent Healthy Aging Seminar at UBC, two hearing experts said that "up to 65% of adults in B.C. aged 60 and over have hearing loss. Untreated hearing loss affects communication and quality of life and is linked to social isolation and greater risk of falls".

Other serious impacts of unmanaged hearing loss, according to the Canadian Hearing Service website, “include an increased risk of cognitive decline and developing Alzheimer’s disease and other forms of dementia”.

According to the May 2024 McMaster University’s Optimal Aging Portal, knowing when to get help for hearing loss is dependent on several factors. It is probably time to get help when it is difficult to follow conversations, you do not want to participate in activities that are important to you, your family and friends have noticed your hearing loss, and they have trouble relating to you.

Older adults who are experiencing a hearing loss may become fearful about being alone because they are afraid they may not hear the phone, doorbell, and other household sounds or alarms.

So, what can you do? The Macmaster Aging portal suggests three things: talk to your health care professional about scheduling a hearing test, early intervention can make a difference. Utilize tools which may help with moderate to low hearing loss such as amplified phones and captioning devices. I personally have not watched TV without using closed captioning for a while – keeps the sound down to normal.

Finally, stay socially connected even if hearing is difficult.

Though some hearing loss is irreversible, according to On Health, the November 2019 edition of Consumer Reports, some problems are related to conditions that could be fixed. These include too much earwax, clogged sinuses, side effects of some over the counter medications and ear infections. If these problems are not the issue, getting properly fitted hearing aids works for many older people experiencing hearing loss.

Your health care provider might suggest a good hearing specialist, and seniors’ centres often provide hearing clinics throughout the year.

The Canadian Hard of Hearing Association says, “with the help of hearing aids, assistive listening devices, the support of understanding family and friends, many older hard of hearing people continue to lead happy, independent and fulfilling lives.”

Margaret Coates is the co-ordinator of Lionsview Seniors’ Planning Society. She has lived on the North Shore for 53 years and has worked for and with seniors for twenty-seven of those years. Ideas for future columns are welcome. Email lions_view@telus.net.