



# Hearing loss Info-sheet for seniors

**H**earing loss is a disability that frequently goes unnoticed. It is the most common sensory impairment in adults over the age of 65, affecting more than 30% of Canadians in this age group. Hearing loss is serious: not only does it affect the physical sense of hearing, it affects overall well-being. Because of the communication difficulties it creates, hearing loss can lead to withdrawal from family, friends and social situations.

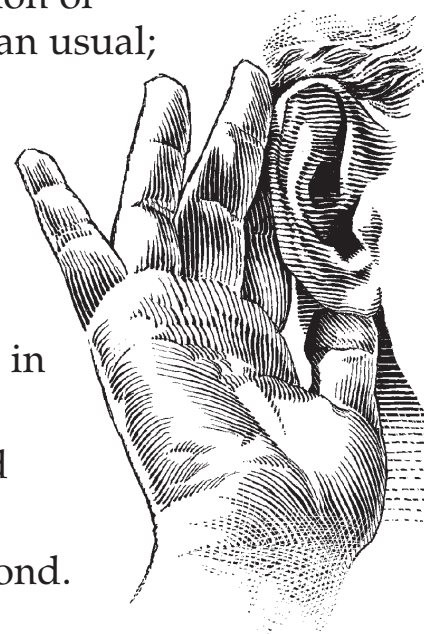
## Types of hearing loss

One in 10 Canadians has a hearing loss. More than 50% of Canadians over the age of 65 have an **inner ear** hearing loss. Inner ear hearing loss is usually not reversible. Some of its causes, such as noise damage (see box on p. 3 for more causes), are preventable by wearing hearing protection or avoiding very loud environments (such as rock concerts).

## Warning signs of hearing loss

Signs of hearing loss in adults may include:

- speaking louder than necessary in a conversation;
- constantly asking for words to be repeated;
- straining to hear;
- misunderstanding conversations;
- favouring one ear;
- thinking that people always mumble;
- turning the television or radio up louder than usual;
- having difficulty hearing on the telephone;
- withdrawing from social contact;
- ringing or buzzing in the ears (tinnitus);
- appearing dull and disinterested; and
- being slow to respond.



*Adapted from the CASLPA website.*



One common inner ear condition, called **presbycusis**, reduces perception of high-pitched sounds, such as birds singing, bells ringing and certain consonant sounds in speech (s, sh, f, th). Without high-pitched sounds, speech seems muffled and unclear. Those with presbycusis often "hear" but do not understand what is being said.

**Conductive hearing loss** blocks sound from getting through to the inner ear. Sound is quieter but clear if turned loud enough. The person's own voice seems louder to them, so they will often speak more softly. Causes may include packed earwax, infection or fluid in the middle ear, or abnormal bone growth on the tiny middle ear bones. Some of these causes can be treated by medication or surgery.

**Central deafness** is damage to the hearing centres in the brain caused by stroke, head injury or lengthy high fever. A person with central deafness can often hear normally but has difficulty processing what is heard.

**Head noises** (tinnitus) is a common hearing-related problem characterized by the sensation of sound when there is no external noise. Tinnitus sounds vary widely from person to person, including

descriptions such as ringing, buzzing, chirping, whistling, hissing or pulsing. This may be accompanied by tension in the head and neck, fatigue, irritability, poor concentration, feelings of panic and depression. For some, the tinnitus is constant and has a significant impact on their lives, and for a few, the impact of tinnitus and its side effects can be disabling. However, for most people head noises come and go without causing severe inconvenience.

Tinnitus may occur with a hearing loss, but can also occur in someone with normal hearing. When it is present with normal hearing, it may be a warning sign that the inner ear is beginning to be damaged. Potential causes are numerous, for example, exposure to excessive noise, age-related changes of the inner ear, certain medications (e.g., high doses of aspirin), high blood pressure, head trauma, nerve tumour, and increased

*Hearing is important for your personal safety and overall health. Educate yourself about the early signs of hearing loss and consult your doctor immediately if you notice a change in your hearing capacity.*

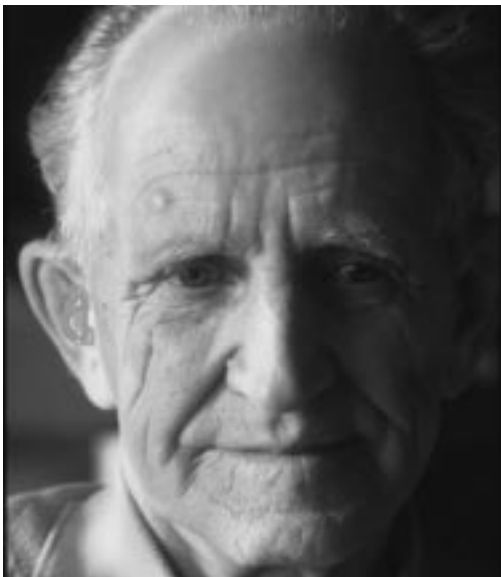


fluid in the inner ear. Therefore, it is important to consult a physician to determine the cause.

## Causes of hearing loss

Common causes of hearing loss include:

- the aging process;
- noise exposure;
- heredity;
- middle ear dysfunction;
- certain medications;
- neurological diseases or stroke;
- head injury;
- inner ear infection; or,
- in rare cases, tumours.



**1 in 10 Canadians has a hearing loss.**

## What to do

If you think that you have a hearing loss or have tinnitus, ask your family doctor to refer you to an audiologist for a hearing test. A thorough hearing evaluation by an audiologist is important to determine the type and degree of hearing loss, and what treatment or hearing aid options may be available. You may also require a referral to an Ear, Nose and Throat (ENT) doctor if a medically treatable cause of the hearing loss is suspected.

**Get a hearing test every two years.**

## Coping with hearing problems

Don't lose out on communication and contact because you can't hear well. Thousands of Canadians have improved their lifestyle by using assistive devices such as hearing aids to improve the volume of sound in the particular pitches that they miss hearing. Today's hearing aids are much improved and provide clear, comfortable sound. Proper hearing keeps communication flowing. Most people with hearing loss can benefit from a binaural system — a hearing




aid in each ear. It provides better directionality, better clarity, and better ability to separate sounds in noise.

**If you have a hearing aid and are not happy with it, don't hesitate to consult again.**

Management of tinnitus (head noises) may include using a hearing aid or tinnitus masking device, changes in diet, medication, stress management techniques, or tinnitus retraining therapy.

Many other devices can help compensate for hearing loss. You can make your life easier by getting a loud ringer or light on the telephone so you don't miss any calls, activating the captioning feature on your television (available on all newer televisions) and installing a light that flashes when your doorbell rings. For more information on assistive devices, consult *Go for it! A guide to choosing and using assistive devices*: [www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/seniors-aines/pubs/injury\\_prevention/go\\_for\\_it/goforit\\_toc\\_e.htm](http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/seniors-aines/pubs/injury_prevention/go_for_it/goforit_toc_e.htm)

*This info-sheet is available in alternative formats on demand.*

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## For more information...

For additional information please contact the following organizations:

**Canadian Hard of Hearing Association**

[www.chha.ca](http://www.chha.ca)

**Canadian Hearing Society**

[www.chs.ca](http://www.chs.ca)

**Canadian Association of Speech-Language Pathologists and Audiologists (CASLPA)**

[www.caslpa.ca](http://www.caslpa.ca)

**Tinnitus Association of Canada**

[www.kadis.com/ta/tinnitus.htm](http://www.kadis.com/ta/tinnitus.htm)

**Canadian Academy of Audiology**

[www.canadianaudiology.ca](http://www.canadianaudiology.ca)

Many communities have support groups or offer courses to help you and your family and friends communicate better. Online help is also available.

*Our thanks to the Canadian Hard of Hearing Association, the Canadian Hearing Society and the Canadian Association of Speech-Language Pathologists and Audiologists for their help in the preparation of this Info-sheet.*

*Division of Aging and Seniors  
Public Health Agency of Canada  
[www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/seniors-aines](http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/seniors-aines)*