

# Hear, Hear: All About Hearing Loss

By Laura Friedman

### By the Numbers

Hearing loss is the third most common health problem in the U.S., affecting approximately 48 million Americans. The various causes of hearing loss include ototoxic drugs (medicine-induced hearing loss), infections, genetics, head trauma and noise. Although hearing loss can present itself at birth, incidences are higher among older adults, and hearing loss and tinnitus are the top war wounds among active military personnel and veterans.

- 20 percent of U.S. teenagers are currently affected by hearing loss
- 25 percent of Americans between ages 65 and 74 and nearly 50 percent ages 75+ have disabling hearing loss
- 3 in 5 veterans returning from war suffer from hearing loss or tinnitus

### Effect

Regardless of age, type of hearing loss or cause, hearing loss can have negative effects on one's well-being if left untreated or undetected. According to the Better Hearing Institute, untreated hearing loss can lead to considerable negative social, psychological, cognitive and health effects and can seriously impact professional and personal life, at times leading to isolation and depression. Even mild hearing loss leads to a three times higher chance of falling and being nearly twice as likely to develop dementia compared with those who have

typical hearing. Let's not forget hearing loss is twice as common in people with diabetes and can also affect cardiovascular health.

Left undetected in young children, hearing loss can impair speech and language acquisition, academic achievement, and social and emotional development. These conditions can be avoided through early detection of hearing loss and subsequent intervention. Passed in 1994, Universal Newborn Hearing Screening legislation has significantly reduced the number of undetected hearing loss cases among children. In 1993, only 5 percent of newborns were tested at birth; by 1997, 94 percent were screened before leaving the hospital, and today that number is 97 percent. The organization I represent, Hearing Health Foundation, was instrumental in getting this legislation passed.

### Prevention

Noise-induced hearing loss is the most common and preventable cause of hearing loss. Hearing loss can occur after exposure to sudden, loud sounds, or from loud sounds experienced over a prolonged period of time. Loud sounds damages sensitive structures in the inner ear known as hair cells, which are located in the cochlea. These cells convert sounds into electrical impulses that travel to the brain to be interpreted. Once these hair cells are damaged, the loss of hearing becomes permanent.

The rule of thumb for safe

noise exposure is no more than 85 decibels for a maximum of eight continuous hours. The decibel, or dB, is a unit to measure sound intensity, and 85 dB is roughly equivalent to the sound of heavy city traffic. The louder the volume, the shorter the duration for safe listening.

If you are in an environment where you have to shout to be heard, it is probably too loud. To be sure you're keeping your ears safe, use a decibel meter - there are many available as smartphone apps - and then remember to walk, block and turn: Walk away from the sound source, block your ears using earplugs and turn down the volume.

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munications and Programs Manager of Hearing Health Foundation, a New York City-based nonprofit whose mission

is to prevent and cure hearing loss and tinnitus through groundbreaking research and to promote hearing health.