

ENT

Troubles?



Here's a look at two common ear, nose and throat (ENT) conditions and how they can be treated.

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#1 Hearing loss

Hearing loss is a condition that occurs when one or both ears are not working properly. It can present right from birth or later in life, at any stage. And it's not just an elderly condition. Even children who previously had normal hearing can develop hearing loss.

In fact, a frightening number of younger people – specifically, 12- to-35-year-olds – are at risk of developing permanent hearing loss from listening to music and gaming devices at high volumes for prolonged periods of time, says DR REBECCA HEYWOOD, a British ENT surgeon in Singapore, with special expertise in managing complex ear and hearing conditions in adults and children.



In addition to loud noise exposure, some common causes of acquired hearing loss in adults and children include:

- build-up of ear wax;
- ageing;
- infection of the outer or middle ear;
- fluid behind the ear drum (known as “ear glue”);
- and
- certain medications that are harmful to the inner ear.

For many people, hearing loss develops quite slowly, making it difficult to distinguish any obvious change in hearing capabilities. For example, someone with mild to moderate hearing loss may not notice that the everyday sounds around them have dulled.

“By the time hearing loss becomes severe, only very loud sounds can be heard and those affected may not even know that people are talking to them at all at a normal conversational level,” says Dr Heywood.

How hearing loss can hurt you

Because hearing loss is an “invisible” condition, it's all too often disregarded. However, untreated hearing loss can have detrimental effects on all aspects of an individual's life.

“Life is all about communication, and people with hearing loss have difficulty communicating. Having hearing loss can be extremely lonely and isolating,” says Dr Heywood. “For someone with mild to moderate hearing loss, dinner with family or friends can create feelings of exclusion and loneliness, even while surrounded by loved ones.”

Additionally, people with hearing loss often feel embarrassed about asking others to repeat themselves constantly. Sometimes, they pretend to understand, but miss what’s being said completely.

This, of course, poses challenges at school and in the workplace, and everywhere in between. It can take a major toll on personal relationships, leading to social isolation and lack of self-esteem, and even anxiety and depression.

What’s more, Dr Heywood says hearing loss has recently been linked to various health conditions. Elderly people with hearing loss, in particular, have an increased risk of falls, hospitalisation and death, especially due to cardiovascular causes.

Also concerning is the link between hearing loss and memory problems, including an increased risk of dementia. In fact, hearing loss in midlife – not just in old age – has been found to be the largest modifiable risk factor for dementia.

Signs to look for at every life stage

With such challenges posed by hearing loss, it’s important to know the red flags to look for at every phase of life.

Babies and toddlers

Parents of babies with hearing loss may notice that their baby doesn’t startle to loud sounds, or won’t turn toward their voice or environmental sounds, or start to babble. Toddlers with hearing loss may have delayed or even absent speech and language development, depending on the degree of their hearing loss.

Children

Kids with hearing loss may:

- not respond when spoken to, particularly if they’re not close to the speaker;
- look at peoples’ faces more when they are being spoken to;
- ask for things to be repeated;
- start turning the TV volume louder; and
- fall behind in school.

Parents and teachers may notice that the clarity of the child’s speech has deteriorated, and teachers may complain that the child doesn’t pay attention in class.

Adults

The first thing adults may notice is that they can hear people talking but can’t quite understand what they are saying. This is only made worse with background noise. Family members may notice that an adult with hearing loss needs to turn the TV louder and ask people to repeat things frequently.

Treatment options

Luckily, you don’t have to live with hearing loss. “No matter how bad the hearing loss is, there are treatment options available,” says Dr Heywood. “With the help of an experienced ENT or audiologist, your quality of life can be transformed.”

Inner ear hearing loss can often be managed with a hearing aid. And, thanks to recent advances, there are now smaller, more aesthetically pleasing options with all kinds of technological capabilities to improve sound quality, says Dr Heywood.

Hearing aids, however, won’t prove beneficial in cases where the patient’s speech clarity is too depreciated. This is when patients can benefit from cochlear implants – electronic devices that are surgically implanted into the inner ear so that sound signals can be transmitted directly to the cochlear (auditory) nerve that goes to the brain. Music and phone calls can even be streamed from a smartphone to the implants – and hearing aids too.

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