

May 7, 1993

Note: May is Better Hearing Month

HEARING LOSS PATIENTS HAVE MANY OPTIONS

DALLAS--Are you not hearing as well as you used to? Do you find yourself turning up the volume on the television, having trouble understanding people on the telephone or hearing conversations in a crowded room?

You don't have to just live with the difficulties. Hearing professionals can help.

The first thing to do when you notice a hearing problem is contact your doctor, said Wende Yellin, an audiologist at The University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center at Dallas. Your doctor may order an audiogram, or hearing test. This test can tell not only the extent of hearing loss but also the kind of hearing loss one has.

There are two main categories of hearing loss: conductive and sensorineural. A conductive loss occurs when sound can't be sent into the inner ear system. "This can be caused by wax impacted in the ears, fluid in the middle ear or infections of the outer or middle ear," said Yellen, administrative director of UT Southwestern's Clinical Center for Auditory, Vestibular and Facial Nerve Disorders.

The solution to this kind of hearing problem can be as simple as cleaning the ear canal or treating the infection. It also may involve the insertion of tubes to drain fluid from the middle ear or surgery to replace damaged middle ear bone.

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Sensorineural hearing loss is caused by damage to the inner ear, or cochlea, or to the auditory nerve. It can result from excess exposure to loud noise, age, illness or ototoxic medications, and usually is permanent. "With sensorineural hearing loss, we have to find other alternatives to help you hear," Yellin said.

One way of dealing with hearing loss is by making lifestyle adjustments. "You can get telephone amplifiers, captioning on television, earphones for watching television and infrared headsets at some theaters," Yellin said. "These allow you to hear sounds directly, without background noise getting in the way."

People with hearing loss also may benefit from hearing aids, and there are several options available: behind-the-ear aids, aids that fit inside the ear, and even some that fit inside the ear canal. "Some hearing aids are so tiny that you can't even see them," Yellin said.

"Hearing aids today also are better at overcoming the hearing difficulties people are having," she said. Hearing aids can have noise suppression systems, which cut down on background noise. There also are digitally programmed hearing aids and hearing aids with remote switches to control volume. Some even allow for several programs to suit different hearing environments.

"Things do sound different with a hearing aid," Yellin cautions, "especially water. Also, people who have had a high-frequency loss tend to start noticing more squeaks in their cars once they get a hearing aid."

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NOTE: The University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center at Dallas comprises Southwestern Medical School, Southwestern Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences, Southwestern Allied Health Sciences School, affiliated teaching hospitals and outpatient clinics.