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Types of Hearing Loss

ONCE YOU are aware that you have a hearing loss, you will want to learn more about it. There are two major types of hearing loss—conductive and sensorineural. Although sensorineural hearing loss is the most prevalent type of loss, especially in older people, you should seek a proper diagnosis from an appropriate hearing health care provider.

Conductive Hearing Loss

Conductive hearing loss is caused by a blockage, usually in the middle ear, that prevents sound from being conducted to the inner ear. The blockage can be caused by wax buildup, an ear infection, fusion of the bones in the middle ear, a punctured eardrum, or tumors. Sounds seem soft but speech is clear as long as it is loud enough. Hearing aids can be very beneficial to people with a conductive loss. This type of hearing loss also often responds to medical or surgical treatment, but only if the auditory nerve and inner ear are functioning well.

Sensorineural Hearing Loss

Sensorineural hearing loss results from damage to the inner ear. The most common cause of sensorineural hearing loss is aging, although high fevers, ototoxic drugs, and noise are other causes. If you have this type of hearing loss, you have trouble hearing in crowded rooms and while watching television, as well as difficulty understanding conversation. Also called *nerve deafness*, this type of hearing loss usually is not caused by damage to the auditory nerve but to the hair cells in the inner ear. Individual hair cells respond, or are “tuned,” to specific sounds. Some may be so severely damaged that they cannot react when sound from the outside strikes them. At the same time, the hair cells for certain speech sounds may be functioning normally. This causes you to miss parts of words and sentences. Sensorineural loss is rarely correctable medically or surgically; however, in the great majority of cases, properly fitted hearing aids and assistive devices can help you hear better.

Mixed Hearing Loss

This involves both conductive and sensorineural components. Medical or surgical intervention may help the conductive portion and a hearing aid can help both the sensorineural loss and the conductive component.

Other Hearing Disorders

Other conditions often associated with hearing loss follow.

Tinnitus

Tinnitus is the name for a ringing in the ears or other head noises, a common disorder experienced by nearly 50 million

Americans. Tinnitus, which almost always accompanies a hearing loss, can also affect people with normal hearing (see chapter 10).

Ménière's Disease

One of the more common causes of dizziness (vertigo) is Ménière's disease. Its symptoms also include tinnitus, hearing fluctuation, and hearing loss. Its cause is unknown but probably results from abnormality in the fluids of the inner ear. Currently, no known cure for Ménière's disease is available; however, medications can be prescribed for acute attacks, and symptoms may be prevented or somewhat reduced with certain medications, by adopting a low-sodium diet, avoiding caffeine and alcohol, stopping smoking, avoiding noisy and stressful situations, and using exercise to reduce stress and improve circulation. Sometimes surgery is recommended to relieve acute recurrent attacks of dizziness and severe vertigo.

Autoimmune Inner Ear Disease

Autoimmune Inner Ear Disease (AIED) is treatable especially in its early stages with potent anti-inflammatory medications. The inner ear environment triggers an inflammatory response that can damage components of the hearing and balance receptors within the inner ear. The body itself initiates the inflammatory process, attacking the tissues as foreign, even though there is no infection.

Other Conditions

For information about other conditions associated with hearing loss such as otosclerosis, acoustic neuroma, Usher syndrome, and Cogan syndrome, consult your otolaryngologist and library resources.