

Hearing impairment

The Health Column

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Hearing Awareness Week is an annual reminder that nearly 1 in 6 Australians – about 4 million people – have some form of hearing impairment or chronic ear disorder. This year Hearing Awareness Week is being held from 24–30 August with a range of activities to raise awareness.

To illustrate the extent of the issue – at a dinner party with six couples, one of those present will likely have a hearing impairment. Those who have normal hearing often do not appreciate that a loss of hearing results in a basic change in an individual's ability to communicate. The flow-on effect is an inability to effectively interact with family, friends and the general community.

There are many causes of hearing impairment, with a significant proportion self-inflicted and therefore avoidable. Research by the National Acoustic Laboratories found that up to 25% of users of portable music devices will suffer hearing problems, primarily as a result of the volume of the music they listen to through the devices. Another long-recognised problem is industrial deafness, which is accepted as a work health and safety hazard.

In a study conducted outside Flinders St Railway Station in Melbourne and the Sydney Town Hall, 25% of people with personal listening devices attached to their head were hearing noise at a volume which exceeded the safety level at construction sites.

The problem is we often don't know that deafness is creeping up on us. It may not become apparent for some years, and therefore treatment is often started too late.

'Noise destroys – turn down the volume' is the message coming from the Australian Tinnitus Association. Tinnitus is ringing, or tinkling, in the ears, and can also be a hissing or whistling sound. It has been estimated that up to 20% of the population experiences tinnitus from time to time; for about 2% it can be severe, disturbing and have a big impact on sufferers, who may experience this annoying sound 24 hours a day.

In addition to noise, there are other factors which can cause tinnitus including some medicines – most notably quinine and possibly anti-inflammatory medicines. Caffeine (in tea, coffee, cola or chocolate) and alcohol may worsen tinnitus in some people, and smoking, which narrows the blood vessels which supply vital oxygen to the ears, can also make tinnitus worse.



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Tinnitus can be managed or controlled reasonably well, although a cure isn't currently available. Treatment for some other common ear problems is often much easier, provided the cause can be identified in its early stages.

Your pharmacy is your health destination – your pharmacist is there to provide advice, and health services along with medicines. If you have any concerns about your hearing, ask your pharmacist, who can identify local auditory clinics which offer hearing tests. If you are experiencing tinnitus, speak to your pharmacist about the medicines you are taking or any other health concerns. They will be able to refer you for further investigation.

Pharmacies also provide ear plugs to help protect your hearing, for example when using power tools at work. At your local pharmacy, you can also find ear drops for wax or water in the ears.

The *Ear Problems* Fact Card is available from pharmacies throughout Australia providing the Pharmaceutical Society of Australia's Self Care health information. This card offers advice on how to reduce the risk of ear problems, and how to treat those problems when they do occur.

For the nearest Self Care pharmacy location phone the Pharmaceutical Society of Australia on 1300 369 772, or go to www.psa.org.au: 'Supporting practice' then 'Self Care', and then 'Find a Self Care pharmacy'.