

# EAR, NOSE AND THROAT ASSOCIATES OF CHESTER COUNTY

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## HEARING LOSS

Hearing is a very important function that we use in all aspects of our lives. As a result, a loss or decrease can impact the quality of our life in dramatic ways. Otolaryngologists or ENT physicians are specialists in diagnosing and treating hearing loss.

Most people have on occasion been affected by a temporary hearing loss. Any form of hearing loss should be evaluated by your doctor because it can affect the quality of your life. Older people who experience hearing loss will commonly avoid conversations or isolate themselves socially. Your personal safety can also be at risk if you cannot hear warning sounds around you. At times hearing loss may be gradual and you may not be aware of it. Your family or friends may be the first to notice a decrease in your ability to hear or understand what is said.

Hearing loss can be sudden, gradual or congenital, that is, present at birth. It can vary from mild to profound and can be reversible or permanent. A common symptom of hearing loss is muffled hearing. Patients who experience hearing loss may ask others to repeat themselves or to speak slower, clearer, or louder. They may complain that they can hear but cannot understand specific words, especially if there is background noise. An additional symptom of hearing loss is tinnitus or ringing of the ears. (Please refer to the section on Tinnitus)

### TYPES AND CAUSES OF HEARING LOSS

There are three types of hearing loss. Sensorineural hearing loss results from damage to the inner ear or the nerve pathways from the inner ear to the brain. A problem in the external ear canal or the middle ear can result in a conductive hearing loss. Additionally a patient can experience a combination of both sensorineural and conductive hearing loss which is referred to as a mixed hearing loss.

Causes of sensorineural hearing loss include noise exposure, aging (presbycusis), genetics, systemic diseases, infections, tumors, or certain medications or drugs that are toxic to your ears.

Conductive hearing loss can be caused by wax build-up, a foreign body in the ear canal, growths in the middle ear, traumatic injury to the head or ear, a rupture of the ear drum, fluid in the middle ear, or a fracture or scarring of the bones of the middle ear (ossicles).

## **EVALUATION AND TREATMENT OF HEARING LOSS**

A complete and thorough history and physical examination is the initial step in evaluating a hearing loss. Please be able to provide a list of all present and past medications. Note if the hearing loss is fluctuating or stable and if it is progressive in severity. The past medical history might also provide important information as far as injuries or noise exposure. Our website includes a Hearing Loss Questionnaire that you should complete prior to your appointment. A thorough physical examination of the ears will be performed. Our audiologists, who are highly trained professionals, will perform an audiogram or hearing test. Specialized testing of the nerve pathways as well as X-ray studies may be ordered and performed at a later time. Blood studies can also be helpful in the diagnosis of various forms of hearing loss.

Treatment of hearing loss depends on the cause and severity. Clearly a proper diagnosis is necessary. Treatment may be successful in resolving the problem, it may improve the problem, or it may ameliorate the problem.

With a conductive hearing loss the treatment options might include medical or surgical treatment to drain the fluid in the middle ear as well as surgery to repair the bones of the middle ear and ear drum. At times the treatment is considerably more simple and consists of removing a foreign body or wax impaction from the ear.

Hearing aids are very effective treatment for the various forms of hearing loss. When indicated, our highly trained audiologists can assist you in understanding the options as far as types of hearing aids and direct you towards the hearing aid(s) that will be most helpful to you. Our audiologists have available to them a complete complement of all types of hearing aids including Behind the Ear (BTE), In the Ear (ITE), In the Canal (ITC) and Completely in the Canal (CIC) hearing aids. For specific patients, the option of cochlear implants or bone-anchored hearing aids might also be recommended. Our audiologists can also provide individualized treatment for each patient including aural (hearing) rehabilitation.

If you notice a sudden hearing loss, this could be a medical emergency. If this is caused by a nerve injury to the inner ear, there is a narrow window during which treatment can be effective in restoring your hearing. Therefore you should be evaluated by an Otolaryngologist, or ENT physician, in a timely fashion ideally within a period of a week of the onset of the hearing loss.

Regular hearing testing can detect early hearing loss. Future hearing loss can be prevented by protecting your ears from potentially injurious noises. We urge you to avoid loud noise exposure and wear proper ear protection.