Hillcrest HealthCare News©

A newsletter for our patients, their families and friends

Winter 2014

There's No Noise Like Home

Just how noisy is the typical home? There are the sounds coming from *outside* the home, such as barking dogs, traffic, loud music from neighbors, lawnmowers, leaf blowers and hedge clippers. Then there are sounds from *within* the home: air conditioners, vacuum cleaners, hair dryers, television sets, dishwashers, and the clatter of dishes and silverware.

The kitchen can be especially noisy. Putting away dishes can make noise of about 95 decibels (dB) range (on the "A" scale). (The Environmental Protection Agency describes noise in the 90 decibel (dBA) range as "*very annoying.*"

Here are the sound levels of typical household appliances, measured in decibels (A). For comparison, conversational speech is about 50 dB(A).

Item	Loudness in dB (A)
Vacuum cleaner	63-88
Hair dryer	up to 95
Dishwasher	54-72
Washing machine	48-72
Air conditioner	50-68

Noise and hearing loss

Unfortunately, people with hearing loss are often just as sensitive, or even *more* sensitive, to loud sounds and background noise. Digital hearing aids compensate for this increased sensitivity by amplifying less as sounds get louder.

So the next time you're in the kitchen or by the vacuum cleaner, and the clatter and noise is bothering you, you're not alone. You and the sound level meter agree: *Your home can be a noisy place!*

Welcome

. . . to the Winter issue of our patient newsletter, which we believe provides helpful information for our patients, their families, and their friends.

Our practice is based on four fundamental principles:

- ***Good hearing health care is important***
- ***Hearing loss is serious***
- ***Hearing loss deserves professional care***
- ***Hearing aids work***

Noise Management in Digital Hearing Aids

Noise presents a particular challenge if you have a hearing loss. The most common complaint of hearing aid users is *difficulty hearing in noise.*

However, noise is also a common complaint of individuals with normal hearing. According to *Zagat Restaurant Guides*, noise is the second most common complaint about restaurants. A 2012 *Consumer Reports* survey found noise to be the *most* common complaint about restaurants. In other words, normal hearers also complain about noise.

Nevertheless, noise has a greater effect on people with hearing loss. That's because most people with hearing loss have *better* hearing for background noise than for speech. In fact, for many people with hearing loss, some speech sounds may not be heard at all, even when using hearing aids.

The Digital Age

Older hearing aids were very limited in their ability to control noise to improve hearing and comfort in noise. Today's digital hearing aids are much more effective and use at least two approaches to manage noise: *noise reduction* and *directional amplification.*

Noise reduction programs use the characteristics of noise to control the amplification. Because these characteristics are generally different from speech, noise can be processed differently. The chief benefit is improved comfort rather than improved speech understanding.

Directional amplification uses multiple microphones to separate speech from background noise, and can provide significant benefit. *Adaptive* and *automatic* directional processing adjust the directionality based on the characteristics and source of the speech.

A third technique controls the loudness of *all* sounds. **Compression** automatically reduces amplification as sound gets louder. Very loud sounds might not be amplified at all.

While these hearing aid technologies provide improved comfort and better hearing in noisy places, hearing in noise will always be a challenge to someone with hearing loss. And many people forget that everyone finds it more difficult to understand speech in noisy settings.

For other strategies, see the article *"Tactics to Improve Understanding"* in this issue.

Sudden Hearing Loss

Hearing loss usually develops very slowly, but it can also occur suddenly—literally overnight or in the space of a few days.

Sudden hearing loss can be caused by ear wax or ear pressure following an airplane flight. These cases are usually temporary. However, the term "*sudden hearing loss*" usually refers to a sensorineural loss. The loss is almost always in one ear, and may be accompanied by *dizziness* or *tinnitus* (ear noises). Fortunately, sudden hearing loss is rare, occurring in about one in 10,000 people annually.

In most cases, the specific cause of sudden hearing loss is never found. Viral infection or vascular blockage are believed to be the most common causes.

Partial or complete recovery occurs in about 65% of the cases. Recovery can take from a few days to a few months. Those who seek immediate medical attention have a higher recovery rate than those who wait.

Someone who experiences sudden hearing loss should seek medical attention as soon as possible. The medical evaluation usually includes physical, ear and hearing examinations. Follow-up care should include periodic audiologic examinations to monitor hearing levels.

Does Your Doctor Look for Hearing Loss?

"Hearing loss is one of the most common chronic health conditions and has important implications for patient quality of life. However, hearing loss is substantially undetected and untreated."

That was the conclusion of a review of research published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association.*

The authors recommended that physicians screen for hearing loss during routine physical examinations of their patients over 55 years of age. Unfortunately, despite these recommendations, only about 10% of primary care physicians screen their adult patients for hearing loss.

You can help

You can help by encouraging your own doctor to screen for hearing loss. Your doctor may appreciate hearing about your experiences and the difference good hearing healthcare has made in *your* life.

Tips To Hear Better in Noisy Places

Anyone who has a hearing loss knows that understanding speech in noisy settings can be a real challenge.

There are many assistive listening devices and instruments available that help in these settings, including hearing aids, remote microphones, FM amplifiers, wireless devices and "looping" of rooms. But there also some simple things that you can do to make listening and understanding easier.

Move closer. Always try to get closer to the person talking. This is a valuable but underestimated technique. If you're eight feet from someone and you move to within four feet, the voice is significantly louder and clearer. It's also much easier to lipread, which can help more than you realize.

One at a time. Ask that only one person talk at a time. Cross-conversation presents one of the most difficult situations for people with hearing loss—and interrupting is rude.

In a restaurant. When you walk into a restaurant and hear loud music, what do you do? If you ask that the volume be turned down, the manager will probably comply—and other diners will thank you!

Ask for the quietest table. Better yet, look for restaurants that encourage private conversations. Seat yourself in the center of your group, where it's easier for you to see and hear everyone.

Unfortunately, there is a recent trend to surround dining areas with television screens that are both visually distracting and noisy. These places are best avoided if possible.

At home. Many people feel they should have music on when entertaining people in their home. A gentle request to turn it off usually suffices. Television should be turned down or off, or try to move your conversation to a quieter area in the house.

Advance planning. Before you attend a lecture, call ahead to see if they have assistive listening devices available. Otherwise, this difficult setting may be too much of a challenge. However, sitting up front in one of the first few rows can also make a big difference.

Condensed with permission from *The Consumer Handbook on Hearing Loss & Hearing Aids,* Richard Carmen, editor, Auricle Ink.

The Gift of Hearing

We want to extend our thanks to those people and companies who supported our ***Heart of a Hearing Aid Campaign, and Allen Massie's 17th annual medical mission trip to Peru*** in October. Your donations of hearing aids and monies, made the campaign a success, and Allen fit over 250 hearing aids in just one week! Thank you for providing the gift of hearing to a grateful region!

You too can provide the gift of hearing to someone you know simply by sharing your own journey to better hearing! Many people are unaware or don't want to admit they have a hearing problem and don't know where to seek the help they need. In a recent survey, people said they would seek help if a friend or family member asked them to do so.

We especially want to express our sincere appreciation and gratitude to our patients. The trust and confidence you placed in us is inspiring, so thank you for making this a successful year. We wish you and your family a happy and healthy 2014!

Sincerely,

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