

# Hearing Impairment *in older adults*

**H**earing loss is one of the most prevalent chronic conditions in the elderly population, affecting an estimated 30 percent to 46 percent of individuals over age 65 and 90 percent of individuals over age 80.<sup>1</sup> Because of the gradual and progressive nature of hearing loss, appropriate diagnostic and therapeutic interventions may be delayed or foregone altogether.<sup>2,3</sup> As the following findings drawn from the scientific literature indicate, screening and treatment of hearing loss have the potential to significantly improve the quality of life and functional status of vulnerable elders:

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*The portable Audioscope appears to be the best objective screening tool for hearing loss among the elderly. It has an overall sensitivity of 94 percent (range from 87 to 96 percent) and an overall specificity of 72 percent (range from 70 to 90 percent).<sup>4,5</sup>*

*Hearing loss can also be quickly and easily identified with the Hearing Handicap Inventory for the Elderly-Short version (HHIE-S), a five-minute, ten-item subjective screening tool that has an overall accuracy of 75 percent.<sup>4</sup>*

*Hearing aid use can alleviate the depression and the impairment in communication abilities, social relationships, cognitive functioning, and self-sufficiency associated with hearing loss.<sup>6-9</sup>*

*Elders with known hearing loss have a low incidence of hearing aid use,<sup>10</sup> and those with hearing aids tend to underutilize them due to operational difficulties and ear discomfort.<sup>11</sup> Audiologists can properly fit hearing aids and educate patients on hearing aid use and communication strategies, all of which have been shown to increase hearing aid compliance.<sup>10,12</sup>*

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Unfortunately, the prevalence of hearing impairment will continue to increase as the general population ages. The value of routine screening for hearing loss has not been proven. However, the findings outlined above suggest that more attention paid to the identification and treatment of hearing loss could improve the functioning and wellbeing of a significant proportion of the elderly population.

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## References

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