

# Hear today...

Is hearing loss inevitable as we get older? **David Hughes** investigates

**A**N ESTIMATED one in six of the UK population suffers from some form of hearing loss, and the great majority of those – eight million – are over the age of 60. Yet although hearing loss is a common result of ageing, it's not inevitable.

Signs of age-related hearing loss vary, but they usually come about because of general wear and tear – our ears, like everything else, tend to work less well as time goes on.

According to [healthyhearing.com](http://healthyhearing.com): “As we get older, degeneration within the inner ear and along the nerve pathways to the brain can impact our hearing. Most of the time, these changes are related to the health of tiny hair cells in the inner ear that help us hear.

“These hair cells translate the sound waves our ears collect into electrical signals for the brain to interpret as recognisable sound. Since hair cells do not regenerate or regrow, any hearing



## Foods to help hearing

### 1 Potassium

Potassium regulates the fluid in your inner ear, which is important because, as we age, these levels tend to drop, contributing to hearing loss.

*Foods rich in potassium: potatoes, spinach, lima beans, tomatoes, raisins, apricots, bananas, melons, oranges, yogurt and low-fat milk.*

### 2 Folic acid

Folic acid helps your body generate new cell growth and helps increase circulation in the body, contributing to the overall health of the hair cells in your inner ear.

*Foods rich in folic acid: fortified breakfast cereal, liver, spinach, broccoli and asparagus.*

### 3 Magnesium

Research shows that people treated with magnesium in conjunction with Vitamins A, C, and E are protected when exposed to high levels of noise. It's believed that the magnesium acts as a protective barrier to hair cells in the inner ear when loud noises are emitted. And lack of magnesium has been shown to shrink blood vessels in the inner ear, causing oxygen deprivation.

*Foods rich in magnesium: bananas, artichokes, potatoes, spinach and broccoli.*

### 4 Zinc

Known to increase cell growth and heal wounds, zinc boosts the body's immune system and helps ward off infections that can affect the ear. However, check with your doctor before consuming this mineral, as it may interact with

antibiotics and diuretics.

*Foods rich in zinc: beef, pork and dark-meat chicken, cashews, almonds, peanuts, beans, split peas, lentils, oysters - and dark chocolate.*

### 5 Omega-3 fats and Vitamin D

We've all heard about the anti-inflammatory and anti-ageing properties of Omega-3s, but did you know it's been shown to prevent hearing loss? A recent study found that servings of this mineral can reduce the risk of age-related hearing loss by more than 40 per cent. Omega-3s can also help brain function, sending signals between your brain and ears more effectively.

*Foods rich in Omega-3s: flaxseed oil, krill oil, salmon, soybean oil, sardines.*

*Source: [campaignforbetterhearing.ca](http://campaignforbetterhearing.ca)*

## Causes of hearing loss

Hearing loss can have many causes. For example:

- Sudden hearing loss in one ear may be due to earwax, an ear infection, a perforated (burst) eardrum or Meniere's disease.
- Sudden hearing loss in both ears may be the result of damage from a very loud noise, or taking certain medicines that can affect hearing.
- Gradual hearing loss in one ear may be due to something inside the ear, such as fluid (glue ear), a bony growth (otosclerosis) or a build-up of skin cells (cholesteatoma).
- Gradual hearing loss in both ears is usually caused by ageing or exposure to loud noises over many years

*Source: NHS*

## Treatment for hearing loss

■ **Hearing aids.** Those with mild to moderate hearing loss may benefit from hearing aids. After a thorough hearing evaluation, a hearing health care professional will recommend the type and style of aid.

■ **Cochlear implants,** can be given to older adults diagnosed with severe or profound hearing loss. These medical devices are surgically implanted behind your ear to help you detect sound and understand speech.

■ **Assistive listening devices (ALDs)** amplify sound from your television, telephone and other personal electronic devices. ALDs can be used with or without hearing aids, depending on the type and severity of your hearing loss.

*Source: [healthyhearing.com](http://healthyhearing.com)*

## Symptoms of age-related hearing loss

The following are the most common symptoms of age-related hearing loss:

- Speech of others sounds mumbled or slurred.
- High-pitched sounds, such as 's' or 'th', are hard to distinguish.
- Conversations are difficult to understand, particularly when there is background noise.
- Men's voices are easier to hear than women's.
- Some sounds seem overly loud and annoying.
- Tinnitus (ringing in the ears) may occur in one or both ears.

The symptoms of age-related hearing loss may look like other conditions or medical problems. Always consult your health care provider for a diagnosis.

*Source: [hopkinsmedicine.org](http://hopkinsmedicine.org)*



loss we experience as a result of this damage is permanent.”

The name for this age-related hearing loss is presbycusis, and it normally develops gradually over many years, usually affecting both ears.

Heredity is a factor – if our parents suffered from hearing loss, we are more likely to as well. Occupation is also significant – anyone working in a noisy environment, especially with sudden loud noises, is far more likely to experience loss of hearing.

Some medical conditions which can affect the blood supply to the middle ear, such as diabetes, heart disease or high blood pressure, can also contribute to hearing loss, as can the toxic side effects of certain drugs. If hearing loss is beginning to occur, it's worth checking with your GP to see if any medication you are taking might be a factor. There are usually alternative medications which can be prescribed.

## Food and exercise

A healthy lifestyle can help preserve our hearing. Exercise boosts blood flow to the ears, which nourishes those hair

cells in the inner ear, and it will also help avoid illnesses like the ones above which can damage hearing.

Our food can also help (see box, and pass me the Omega-3s), as well as likewise preventing hearing-damaging illnesses.

## Hearing aids

If we're doing all we can in terms of a healthy lifestyle and yet our hearing is still getting worse, it makes sense to consider a hearing aid, which nowadays are a million miles from the cumbersome contraptions of the past, and can be virtually unnoticeable.

Despite the improvements in hearing aids, they might still suffer from some kind of stigma. Only about 900,000 people in the UK wear them – nowhere near the number who could benefit from having one.

“The earlier you get them, the more you'll get out of them,” advises the NHS website, “so do not wait until your hearing gets really bad before seeing a GP.”

Other experts agree. “The longer you let your hearing go untreated, the harder it will be to hear better once you do get hearing aids,” says [healthyhearing.com](http://healthyhearing.com). “This is due to auditory deprivation, which is not just bad for your hearing.

“Research indicates that untreated hearing loss among older adults puts people at a greater risk for developing dementia and Alzheimer's disease as well other emotional and physical problems. The good news? Hearing aids can delay the onset of these conditions.”

## Find out more

■ For a handy review of the pros and cons of NHS/private hearing aids, log on to: ([www.which.co.uk/reviews/hearing-aid-providers/article/guides](http://www.which.co.uk/reviews/hearing-aid-providers/article/guides)) and follow the links.