

Tune in to life



DR HO EU CHIN

Two of the biggest challenges in my daily work are, firstly, to convince patients that they have a hearing impairment and, secondly, that the impairment can be improved with hearing aids.

"Doctor, if my friends see me wearing hearing aids, they will think I am deaf."

"So, this hearing aid will slow down my hearing loss?"

"If I wear hearing aids all the time, my ears will get used to them and forget how to hear when I am not wearing them."

Misconceptions about hearing impairment, like those mentioned above, are very prevalent and myths about hearing aids abound.

It's interesting to analyse the above three statements that are commonly uttered by patients.

The first is ironic, as people who opt to wear hearing aids will no longer be deaf.

The second statement is one of hope, but the truth is, hearing impairment gets worse over time and it is almost always inevitable with the "wear and tear" of ageing.

Hearing aids, when used properly, will neither accelerate nor decelerate the natural deterioration of our hearing. But they will help us to hear, listen and comprehend better with the remaining hearing function that we still have.

For the vast majority of people, hearing impairment or deafness is not an all-or-nothing phenomenon, but a continuum ranging from perfect hearing to complete deafness. The question is at which point on this scale is your hearing ability at?

The third statement shows that hearing aid users are constantly reminded about how much better they can hear when they are using their hearing aids.

Our modern world can be a rather noisy place and many of us do seek the occasional quiet time, which can have calming and therapeutic effects on our mental and physical well-being.



ST ILLUSTRATION: ADAM LEE

SILENCE IS NOT GOLDEN

While silence may be golden, there are many negative consequences for the hearing-impaired when this silence becomes permanent.

For the young, untreated hearing impairment can have a detrimental effect on their speech and language development, while older individuals may face underemployment and unemployment.

Problems with day-to-day communication can cause the deterioration of relationships.

In addition, a reduced awareness of your surroundings may compromise your personal safety.

Last but not least, it's hard to maintain a good sense of humour if one is always missing the punchline.

All of these can lead to negative changes in a person's personality, accelerate dementia and depression, result in social isolation and, ultimately, reduce one's quality of life.

Many people either deny or ignore their hearing impairment.

Among our cohort of patients whom we have prescribed hearing aids, many already have

severe hearing loss by the time they consult us.

The gradual process of hearing loss may be the reason why they fail to notice their hearing impairment until it is troubling them severely.

Typically, the patient's family members will notice the hearing impairment earlier than the patient himself, who tends to be in denial.

HEAR BETTER WITH DEVICES

The vast majority of people with hearing impairment would benefit from hearing aids and other assistive hearing devices to help them hear better.

Generally, the shorter the duration of hearing loss, the quicker the person is able to adapt to the hearing device.

A consequence of chronic, progressive hearing loss is that patients gradually forget what "normal background" noises, such as traffic and the humming of the fan, air-conditioner and computers, sound like.

Most of us are able to shut out these noises as the brain can recognise them for what they are.

People who start to wear hearing aids after a prolonged period of deafness would often complain that it is noisy as their brains may have difficulty discriminating between useful speech and everyday background noises.

Perseverance in wearing the hearing aids often lead to improved noise tolerance but, nonetheless, some patients may choose to reject their hearing aids early on.

Unfortunately, elderly patients may also have decreased cognitive functioning that would hamper the rehabilitation of their hearing loss.

Hearing impairment is frequently invisible to others. It goes unnoticed until someone tries to converse with a person with hearing loss.

We should encourage our family members and friends with suspected hearing loss to get their ears and hearing checked.

Elderly people may be eligible for the Seniors Mobility and Enabling Fund, which can help them pay for hearing aids.

Currently, one can access this fund with the help of medical social workers in restructured hospitals.

Early detection and rehabilitation of patients with hearing impairment is important.

Untreated hearing loss beyond a certain level is considered unsafe for those who drive.

Some patients with hearing loss suffer from tinnitus – a persistent ringing in the ears – as well and using hearing aids will help to solve both problems.

If you are worried about how you look with a hearing aid, there is good news.

Modern digital hearing aids now come in a variety of designs and prices, and are increasingly smaller and more discreet.

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Dr Ho is a consultant at the department of otorhinolaryngology (ear, nose and throat) at Tan Tock Seng Hospital, the flagship of the National Healthcare Group, the Regional Health System for Central Singapore. His clinical interests include diseases of the ear, hearing impairment and balance disorders.

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