EAR AND BALANCE CLINIC

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PRESBYCUSIS

The natural aging process is the most common cause of hearing loss today. Of all Americans over age 65, as many as 50% are hearing-impaired. Age-related hearing loss is generally an inherited trait. It is more common and more severe in men. A hearing impairment significantly reduces a person's ease of conversing and ability to interact with others. Social activities are often less enjoyable.

Presbycusis is the medical term used to describe the permanent partial hearing loss which occurs with aging. Typically it affects the higher pitches or frequencies in the speech range which means greater difficulty understanding the beginnings and endings of words particularly when spoken by females or children.

People with presbycusis often complain they can "hear, but not understand" and that others are mumbling. Although there is no medical or surgical treatment that can restore hearing, presbycusis rarely results in a total hearing loss and is usually helped by a properly fit hearing aid.

Signs of Hearing Loss

Because presbycusis is characterized by a gradual onset, a friend or family member is usually the first to notice a hearing problem. People with hearing impairment may :

- Prefer the television, radio or stereo louder than normal
- Complain that people mumble, slur their words or talk too fast
- Frequently ask people to repeat themselves or
- Complain of ringing in the ears or head noises
- Have difficulty at or avoid restaurants, church, movies, family gatherings or other social settings
- Have difficulty locating the direction sound is coming from
- Monitor the level of their own voice poorly in conversation
- Turn their head to listen or ask others to look at them when speaking
- Become tense or anxious in group situations

Individuals with a suspected hearing loss should have a hearing test by an audiologist or doctor specializing in ear problems. The physician will determine if the hearing loss is due to aging or if it has another, perhaps medically-treatable cause. If the diagnosis is presbycusis, the person may be referred for a hearing aid evaluation to determine how much a hearing aid will help and the appropriate hearing aid options.

Hearing Aids

Hearing aids are the only option to improve hearing function in presbycusis. Fortunately, the current technology emphasizes aiding speech and meets the hearing needs of the vast majority of people with presbycusis. It is a myth that nerve-type hearing loss will not benefit from hearing aids.