



# ENT & Audiology

*A Department of Rutland Regional Medical Center*

## **Oto-Rhino-Laryngology, Allergy, Head & Neck Surgery**

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## **Hearing Loss**

by Kerry B. Finch, MSPAS, PA-C

Hearing loss affects an estimated 48 million Americans or twenty percent of our population. While it is the third most common chronic condition in this country it receives little attention as many people are either unaware that they have hearing loss or minimize the consequences of impaired hearing. While there are many underlying causes of hearing loss, roughly one third of all instances of hearing loss are preventable.

The causes of hearing loss are numerous but first it is important to understand that there are two main types of hearing loss: conductive hearing loss and sensorineural hearing loss. A conductive hearing loss occurs when the transmission of sound through the outer ear, ear canal, eardrum, and/or middle ear space is disrupted. Some examples of disruptions that may occur in the outer or middle ear include excessive earwax in the ear canal, perforation of the eardrum, middle ear space infections, fluid buildup in the middle ear space, or disease of the middle ear bones. In many cases if the underlying cause is treated a conductive hearing loss is reversible. Approximately ten percent of all hearing losses are conductive in nature.

A sensorineural hearing loss is caused by a problem in the inner ear. The problem may be with the cochlea, the hearing organ, or with the hearing nerve. It's also sometimes incorrectly referred to as nerve deafness. This is the most common type of hearing loss accounting for ninety percent of all hearing losses. This type of hearing loss cannot be reversed.

Many factors contribute to the development of hearing loss. It can be present at birth due to congenital or genetic factors; it can be secondary to the natural course of aging, acquired through illness, or secondary to repeated or prolonged noise exposure. Noise induced hearing loss is completely preventable. Recreational activities such as listening to music, hunting, and yard work can contribute as can occupational exposures such as factory work. This type of sensorineural hearing loss is entirely preventable by utilizing hearing protection and limiting exposure.

Signs of hearing loss include ringing in the ears, frequently asking friends and family to repeat themselves, feeling like people are mumbling, or having trouble hearing when there is background sounds. Some people will find themselves elevating the volume on the television or radio. Other individuals do not even realize they are having trouble hearing and it is friends or family members who are the first to identify it.

We are all affected by hearing loss as it takes a significant toll on both those who live with the disorder as well as their families. It is important to seek care if you think you do have a hearing problem as it is necessary to identify the underlying cause if possible and develop strategies for helping to improve hearing and communication.