

# Hearing loss can raise health risks

When most people think of hearing loss, they likely imagine someone elderly. While it is true that most people experience some hearing loss as they age, research suggests there's a widespread lack of awareness about hearing damage among the general public and the ways it can pose additional risks for your overall health.

Statistics Canada reports that as many as 40 per cent of adults ages 20 to 79, or about nine million people in this country, have at least some hearing loss in one or both ears.

An estimated 4.9 million Canadians in that same age range, or 19 per cent, have hearing loss that affects their ability to hear normal speech. Among children and youth ages 6 to 19, some 8 per cent had some hearing loss, while 4 per cent of children ages 3 to 5 showed test responses indicative of potential hearing loss.

Most alarming is the fact that approximately 77 per cent of adults with hearing loss diagnosed by a health-care professional were unable or unwilling to recognize they had a hearing deficit.

HearingLife chief audiologist Jill Price attributes the contradiction to social factors. "It's an invisible disease," she says. "You can't see it and you can't feel it." This makes it easy to forget that it's even a problem — or to simply pretend that it isn't one.

There are cultural stigmas attached to hearing loss that keep people from acknowledging they have a problem or seeking help for it, Price notes. "People associate hearing loss with being old," she says. "We've all seen sitcoms where a grandfather says something silly or funny because he misheard what someone was saying, and then everybody laughs."



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Between the social stigma and lack of acknowledgement, something little understood among the public is the fact that hearing loss may be elevating other health risks.

For instance, there is a statistically signifi-

cant association between hearing loss and depression, according to a 2014 study published in the Journal of the American Medical Association Otolaryngology Head and Neck Surgery. The study found that 11 per cent of people with hearing loss showed symptoms of depression, compared to 5 per cent of people who did not have hearing loss.

Similarly, people with diabetes are about twice as likely to develop hearing loss, Price says. There has also been some correlation reported between hearing loss and dementia or cognitive ability, but researchers caution more work needs to be done in this area before anything definitive can be said about this link. And certain types of hearing loss can also be an early warning sign of cardiovascular disease. When blood flow to the inner ear is impaired, it can affect hearing, which makes a diagnosis a possible early warning sign of serious and even potentially fatal illnesses.

It's all the more reason to have your hearing checked out. You can get a free hearing test at one of over 220 HearingLife locations across Canada by calling toll-free 1-844-226-2302. And learn more about healthy hearing at [hearinglife.ca](http://hearinglife.ca).

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