

# The health effects of hearing loss

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The published research demonstrates that 14% of people aged 55-74 have bilateral hearing loss greater than 35 dB, a level considered clinically important for an intervention. Under-managed hearing loss has consequences in terms of health related quality of life, employment and psycho-social wellbeing. With regards health impacts the published literature shows people with hearing loss report:

- elevated risk rates for diabetes and high blood pressure for people with hearing loss
- a higher incidence of stroke
- increased rates of heart attack and psychiatric illness among people who rated their hearing as poor
- people with hearing loss being higher users of prescribed medications
- people with severe loss being three times more likely to see their doctor than members of the general population
- people with moderate to severe loss being 15 times more likely to need assistance in activities of daily living and up to seven times more likely to require assistance in the home
- a relationship being demonstrated between self-reported hearing-related social participation difficulties and reduced health-related quality of life
- a threshold effect being demonstrated between increasing communication difficulties (due to under managed hearing) and health, even when using hearing aids
- elevated rates of all cause morbidity.

Psycho-social effects of hearing loss are also evident in the literature. We know that people with hearing loss:

- report increased rates of affective mood disorders and poorer social relations
- persistently experience problems hearing in background noise – even when using hearing aids
  - the inconsistency of problems across social settings is confusing and de-legitimises the need to seek help
- role breakdown leaves clients feeling less confident about their ability to function socially
- there are critical social roles that the client now has trouble fulfilling (e.g. grandparent, scout leader):
  - breakdowns in critical social settings tend to occur when environmental demands exceed their physical abilities to hear; tried and proven strategies are ineffective and key helpers (such as spouses) are not available to assist
  - this scenario of high demand, low control, and poor support is a near textbook definition of psychological stress.
- reluctant to acknowledge hearing difficulties, they avoid critical social activities and fear stigmatisation
- take up to 15 years to act on their hearing difficulties
- bluff and pass to avoid awkward communication situations and feel marginalised as a result and
- experience anomic symptoms as a resulting from a loss of social identity.

Notably, people with hearing loss:

1. fear stigmatisation
2. are reluctant to acknowledge their difficulties
3. misperceive the effects of hearing loss as breakdowns in relationships
4. mis-attribute reduced social contact due to hearing difficulties to changes in lifestyle preferences, and
5. take as long as 15 years to act on their hearing loss

People with hearing loss have also been shown to be:

- less likely to be in paid work by a minimum of at least two percentage points for adults of working age, with the rate potentially being much high in harder economic times where people with disabilities are more vulnerable to the impacts of economic downturns, and
- more likely to be on lower income than the population (Access Economics, 2006).