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World Health Organization

10 FACTS ABOUT DEAFNESS



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Fact 1: There are 360 million people in the world with disabling hearing loss

This is over 5% of the world's population - 32 million of these people are children.
Disabling hearing loss is defined as:

Adults (15 years and older): hearing loss greater than 40 decibels (dB) in the better hearing ear; Children (0 – 14 years of age): hearing loss greater than 30 dB in the better hearing ear



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Fact 2: Unaddressed hearing loss poses an annual global cost of 750 billion international dollars

There are significant costs associated with the impacts of unaddressed hearing loss. These include health sector costs, costs of educational support, loss of productivity and societal costs. Interventions to address hearing loss including prevention, screening and provision of hearing devices are cost effective.



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Fact 3: 32 million children have disabling hearing loss

Up to five out of every 1000 babies may be born with hearing loss or acquire it soon after birth. Hearing loss can have a significant impact on a child's development and educational achievements. Early identification of such hearing loss followed by prompt and suitable interventions can help to ensure that children with deafness and hearing loss enjoy equal opportunities in society.

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Fact 4: Chronic ear infections are a leading cause of hearing loss

Over 30% of hearing loss in children is caused by diseases such as measles, mumps, rubella, meningitis and ear infections. It is estimated that up to 330 million people suffer with chronic ear infections (chronic otitis media, i.e. COM) globally. When left untreated, COM leads to hearing loss and can cause life-threatening complications and mortality. COM is preventable and can be managed effectively through medical and surgical interventions.



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Fact 5: Nearly 1 out of every 3 people over 65 years are affected by disabling hearing loss

Left untreated, hearing loss can lead to exclusion from communication and can contribute to feelings of loneliness, frustration and social isolation. Hearing loss in the elderly is also linked with early cognitive decline and dementia. Age-related hearing loss can be managed effectively through a variety of means, including hearing aids.



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Fact 6: Noise is a major avoidable cause of hearing loss

It is estimated that 1.1 billion people (aged between 12-35 years) are at risk of developing hearing loss due to noise exposure in recreational settings such as concerts and sporting events and through the use of personal music devices. Regular exposure to loud sounds for prolonged periods poses a serious threat of irreversible hearing loss. This is largely preventable through raising awareness of risks, legislation and following safe listening practices.



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Fact 7: Hearing loss can be caused by occupational noise and the use of ototoxic medications

In many places occupational noise, such as loud sounds of machinery and explosions, has become the most compensated occupational hazard. This can be largely prevented through improved awareness and use of personal protective devices. Some commonly used medicines (such as aminoglycosides and certain anti-malarial medicines) can also lead to irreversible hearing loss. Ototoxicity, a drug's property of being toxic to the ear, can be prevented through awareness among health care providers and by the rational use of drugs.

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Fact 8: People with hearing loss can benefit from devices such as hearing aids and cochlear implants

Current production of hearing aids meets less than 10% of the global need, and in developing countries, less than 3%. It is estimated that there are 72 million people who could potentially benefit from the use of a hearing device.

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Fact 9: Sign language and captioning services facilitate communication with deaf and hard of hearing people

Deaf often use sign language as a means of communication. Family members, medical professionals, teachers and employers should be encouraged to learn signs/sign language in order to facilitate communication with deaf people. Use of loop systems in classrooms and public places, as well as provision of captions on audio-visual media, are important for improving accessibility of communication for people with hearing loss.



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Fact 10: 60% of childhood hearing loss is preventable through public health actions

Strategies for prevention of hearing loss include:

- Strengthen maternal and child healthcare programmes including immunization
- Implement infant and school-based hearing screening
- Train healthcare professionals in hearing care
- Make hearing devices and communication therapies accessible
- Regulate and monitor the use of ototoxic medicines and environmental noise
- Raise awareness to promote hearing care and reduce stigma