

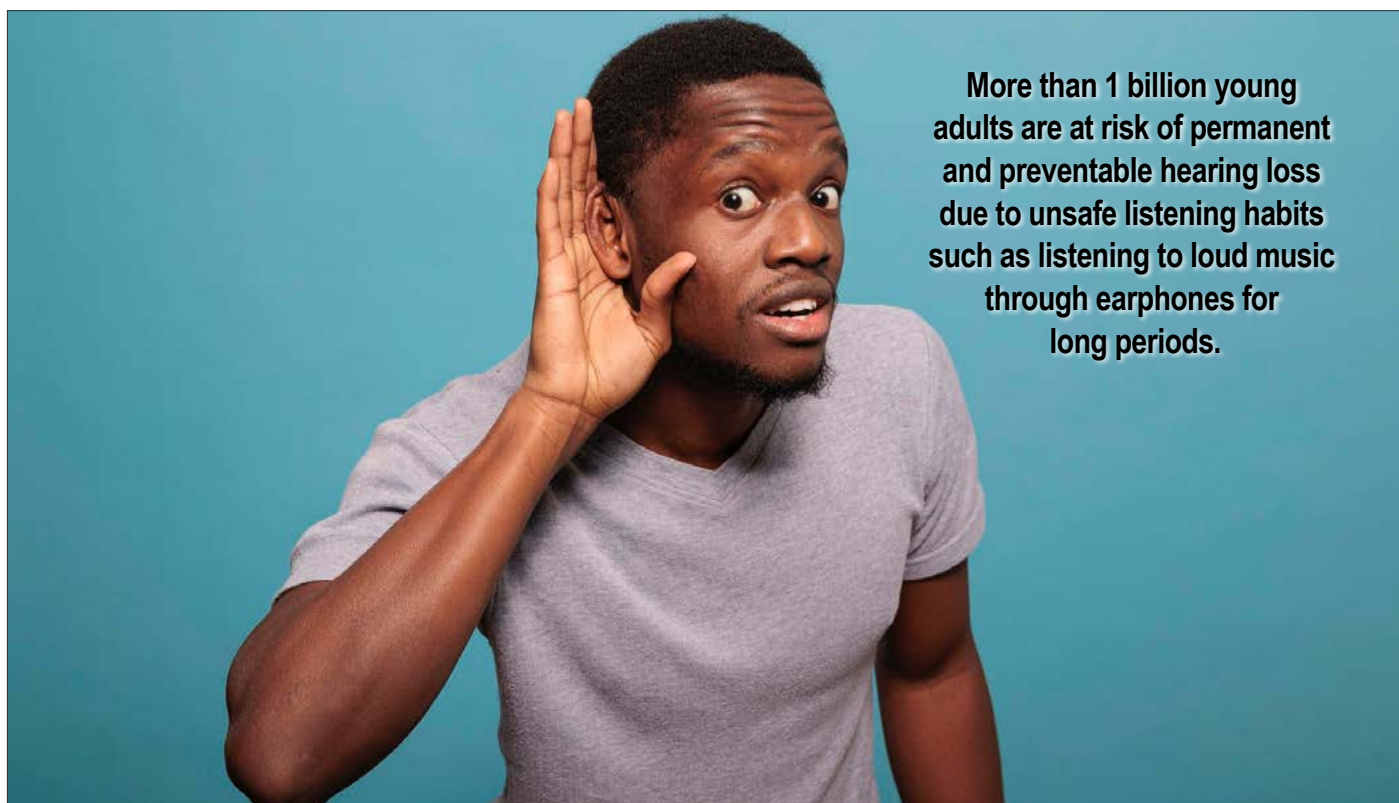
CMScript

Issue 4 of 2026



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Hearing Loss



More than 1 billion young adults are at risk of permanent and preventable hearing loss due to unsafe listening habits such as listening to loud music through earphones for long periods.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), hearing loss is becoming an increasing global public health concern. It is estimated that by 2050, nearly 2.5 billion people worldwide will have some degree of hearing loss, and more than 700 million may need hearing rehabilitation services. Currently, around 95 million children between the ages of 5 and 19 are living with hearing loss. In addition, more than 1 billion young adults are at risk of permanent and preventable hearing loss due to unsafe listening habits such as listening to loud music through earphones for long periods.

The impact of unaddressed hearing loss is substantial, with an estimated global cost of almost US\$ 1 trillion annually.

More than 430 million people worldwide currently live with hearing loss severe enough to require support or treatment to improve hearing and communication, including around 34 million children.

Background

Hearing loss is a common condition that can affect people of all ages, although it is more frequently seen in older adults. It may develop slowly over time or occur suddenly,

depending on the cause. Hearing loss can make communication difficult and may affect a person's daily functioning, relationships, school or work performance, and overall quality of life.

Understanding the causes, symptoms, and available treatment options is important to ensure early diagnosis and appropriate management.

What is hearing loss?

Hearing loss occurs when there is a problem in one or more parts of the ear or the hearing system. Normally, sound waves travel through the outer ear to the middle ear and then to the inner ear, where they are converted into signals that the brain interprets as sound. When this process is disrupted, hearing loss can occur. When any part of the process is affected, hearing loss can occur.

There are three main types of hearing loss:

- Conductive hearing loss, where sound cannot properly pass through the outer or middle ear.
- Sensorineural hearing loss, caused by damage to the inner ear or hearing nerve.
- Mixed hearing loss, which is a combination of conductive and sensorineural hearing loss.

Signs and Symptoms

The symptoms of hearing loss may vary depending on the cause and severity, but commonly include:

- Difficulty hearing or understanding conversations, especially in noisy environments.
- Frequently asking others to repeat themselves.
- Increasing the volume on the television or radio.
- Feeling that others are mumbling when they speak.
- Ringing or buzzing sound in the ears (tinnitus).

In children, hearing loss may present as delayed speech development or a lack of response to sounds.

Causes and Risk Factors

Hearing loss may occur as a result of various factors, including:

- Age-related changes in the inner ear.
- Exposure to loud noise over time.
- Ear infections or fluid build-up in the ear.
- Earwax blockage.
- Injury to the ear or head.
- Certain medical conditions or medications.

Some people may have a higher risk of hearing loss due to family history, repeated ear infections, advancing age, and prolonged exposure to loud noise.

Possible complications

If left untreated, hearing loss can lead to several complications, such as:

- Difficulty communicating with others.
- Social withdrawal and isolation.
- Reduced work or school performance.
- Emotional distress, including anxiety and depression.
- Reduced overall quality of life.

Prevention

Although not all forms of hearing loss can be prevented, the risk can be reduced by:

- Limiting exposure to loud noise.
- Wearing hearing protection in noisy environments.
- Seeking treatment early for ear infections.
- Avoiding inserting objects inside the ear.
- Undergoing regular hearing assessments if at risk.

Diagnosis

Hearing loss is diagnosed through a combination of medical examinations and hearing tests. A healthcare provider may:

- Review the patient's medical history and symptoms.
- Examine the ears.
- Conduct hearing tests such as audiometry.
- Request further investigations (e.g. imaging) where necessary.

Treatment and Management

Treatment of hearing loss depends on the underlying cause and severity of the condition. For hearing loss caused by conditions that can be treated or reversed, treatment may include:

- Removal of earwax.
- Treatment of infections with medication.
- Surgical intervention where appropriate.

For permanent hearing loss, treatment may include:

- Communication strategies and assistive devices.
- Hearing aids to help amplify sound.
- Cochlear implants for severe hearing loss.

Early diagnosis and treatment are important to improve communication and maintain quality of life.

What is covered under the PMBs?

Funding for hearing loss under Prescribed Minimum Benefits (PMBs) is dependent on the underlying diagnosis and clinical circumstances.

Where hearing loss is linked to a PMB condition, such as infections, trauma (injury), or tumours, the medical scheme must fund the diagnosis, treatment, and care in full, in accordance with PMB Regulations.

The treatment provided must align with evidence-based practice and the level of care available in the state sector. Assistive devices, such as hearing aids, are not automatically covered under the PMB benefits. Funding of these devices will depend on whether they are considered medically necessary as part of the treatment of a PMB condition and whether they meet applicable treatment guidelines and state sector protocols. Each case is therefore assessed individually, based on the diagnosis, clinical need, and applicable PMB requirements.

Conclusion

Hearing loss is a common condition, but with early diagnosis and appropriate treatment, many people can continue to communicate effectively and maintain a good quality of life. Anyone experiencing symptoms of hearing loss is encouraged to seek medical advice to determine the cause and discuss the most suitable treatment options.

References

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